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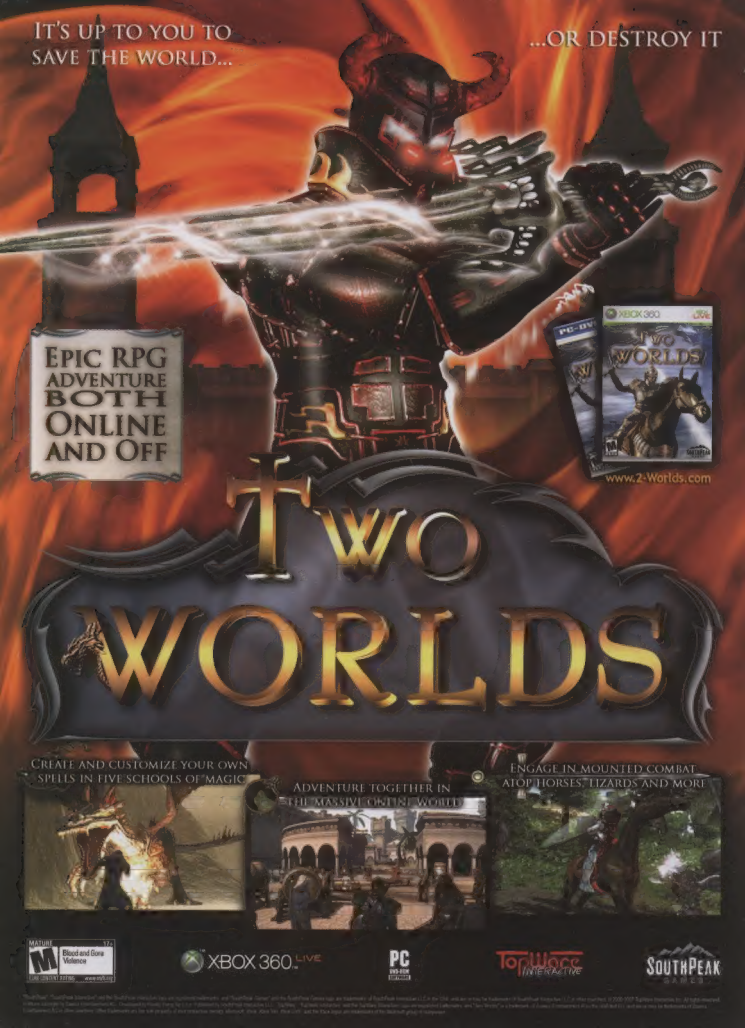
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GET TOGETHER. ROLL SOME DICE. HAVE FUN.

*LEFT and BELOW: Artist Scott M. Fischer is the subject of this issue's Gallery. COVER: Michelle Pfeiffer stars as Lamia, an evil witch, in* Stardust. *Photo © Paramount Pictures/by David James.*

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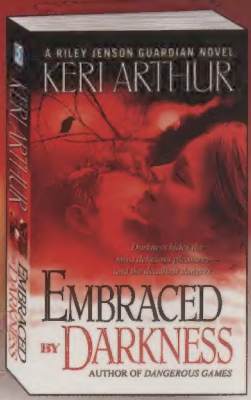


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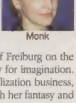
**JEFF VANDERMEER** grew up in the Fiji Islands and spent six months traveling through Asia, Africa, and Europe before returning to the United States. These travels have deeply influenced his fiction. VanderMeer's book-length fiction has been translated into 15 languages, while his short fiction has appeared in several year's best anthologies and short-listed for Best American Short Stories. A two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award, VanderMeer has also been a finalist for the Hugo Award, the Philip K. Dick Award, the International Horror Guild Award, the British Fantasy Award, the Bram Stoker Award, and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. His most recent books have made the year's best lists of *Publishers Weekly*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Los Angeles Weekly*, *Publishers' News*, and Amazon.com. VanderMeer has edited or co-edited several anthologies, including the critically acclaimed *Leviathan* series, *Best American Fantasy*, and *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases*. He also writes for *The Washington Post Book World*, *Publishers Weekly*, *SF Weekly*, *Booksluts*, *The SF Site*, *Locus Online*, and many others. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with his wife, Ann, and three cats.

Lake

**JAY LAKE** lives in Portland, Oregon, with his books and two inept cats, where he works on numerous writing and editing projects, including the World Fantasy Award-nominated *Polyphony* anthology series from Wheatland Press. His current project is *Trial of Flowers* from NightShade Books, followed by *Mainspring*, summer, 2007 from Tor. Jay is the winner of the 2004 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and a multiple nominee for the Hugo and World Fantasy Awards. Jay can be reached through his blog at *jaylake.livejournal.com*.


Monk

**DEVON MONK** lives in Oregon with her husband, sons, and a colorful assortment of friends and family. Her short stories have appeared in *Year's Best Fantasy 2*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Black Gate*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Talebones* and also in a variety of anthologies including *Fantasy Gone Wrong*, *Maiden Matron Crone*, and *Fantastic Companions*. For more about Devon and her work, go to *www.devon monk.com*.

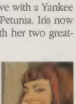
Nestvold

A former assistant professor of English in the picturesque town of Freiburg on the edge of the Black Forest, **RUTH NESTVOLD** has given up theory for imagination. The university career has been replaced by a small software localization business, and the Black Forest by the parrots of Bad Cannstatt. She lives with her fantasy and her family and her books in a house with a turret and has sold stories to numerous markets, including *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, *Scifiction*, *Gardner Dozois's Year's Best Science Fiction*, and several anthologies. Her novella "Looking Through Lace" made the short list for the Tiptree Award in 2003 and was nominated for the Sturgeon Award. She maintains a web site at *www.ruthnestvold.com*.

In 2001 **JACK SKILLINGSTEAD** won Stephen King's "On Writing" contest. The following year Jack made his first professional sale. Since then he has sold around twenty short stories to various markets, including *Asimov's* and *On Spec*. He has been a finalist for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, and his work has appeared various Year's Best anthologies. His novel, *My Harbinger*, is currently being reviewed by publishers. Jack lives with his family in Seattle.

**DAVID BARR KIRTLEY**'s short fiction has appeared in magazines such as *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, *On Spec*, and *Cicada*, and in anthologies such as *New Voices in Science Fiction*. He is a graduate of various writers' workshops, including Clarion, Odyssey, James Gunn's Writers Workshop, Orson Scott Card's Writers Bootcamp, and Viable Paradise. He is currently a graduate student in the Master of Professional Writing program at the University of Southern California. Visit him on the Web at *www.david barrkirtley.com*.

**NAOMI KRITZER** wrote "Honest Man" in honor of her grandmother's 80th birthday. While the major events of the story are fictional (as is the character of Leo), the character of Iris is based on Naomi's grandmother, who really did work for the FBI during World War II, really did fall in love with a Yankee infantryman, and really does say that she's grateful that her parents didn't name her Petunia. Iris now lives in the Twin Cities, close to Naomi and her family, and enjoys regular visits with her two great-granddaughters.


Black

**HOLLY BLACK** is the bestselling author of contemporary fantasy novels for teens and children. Her first book, *Tithe: A Modern Faerie Tale*, was published in 2002 by Simon & Schuster. She has since written two other books in the same universe, *Valiant* (2005), and the sequel to *Tithe*, *Ironside* (2007). Holly collaborated with artist Tony DiTerlizzi to create the bestselling *Spiderwick Chronicles*. The first two books were released together in 2003, with the next three following in rapid succession. *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to The Fantastical World Around You* (2005), *The Notebook for Fantastical Observations* (2005), and *Care and Feeding of Sprites* (2006) expanded the universe. Three more Spiderwick chapter books are planned, with the first one expected in fall of 2007. Holly has also been a frequent contributor to anthologies, including *The Faery Reel: Tales from the Twilight Realm*, *Young Warriors: Stories of Strength*, *Coyote Road*, *21 Proms*, *The Restless Dead*, *So Fey*, and *Villains*. She is currently working on a graphic novel series, *The Good Neighbors*, with artist Ted Naifeh, and a new novel called *The White Cat*.

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DEALER INQUIRES WELCOME!

By Resa Nelson

# From novel to film, Neil Gaiman's imprint is on *Stardust.*

Maybe you know Neil Gaiman as a novelist: his best-sellers include *American Gods* (which won the Hugo, Nebula, and Bram Stoker Awards), *Neverwhere*, *Coraline*, *Anansi Boys*, and *Stardust*.

Or maybe you first heard of Gaiman as the creator and writer of *The Sandman* DC Comics series. Issue 19, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," won the 1991 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story, the first comic ever to do so.

But there's another side to Gaiman you may not know. He's also a filmmaker. He wrote the screenplay for the upcoming movie *Beowulf* (due in theaters this November), the English-version script for *Princess Mononoke*, and an episode of TV's *Babylon 5*. Currently, he's one of the producers responsible for bringing his own novel, *Stardust*, to the screen on August 10 (Paramount Pictures) as a $70 million major motion picture with plenty of star power.

All photos © 2007 Paramount Pictures. by David James

*ABOVE: Yvaine, played by Claire Danes, is an angry, injured girl who turns out to be the star Tristan is seeking.*
*INSET: Tristan, played by Charlie Cox, learns about true love from Yvaine.*

A producer's responsibilities vary from movie to movie and from producer to producer. Some producers perform the drudgery of making sure that every single detail is in place before, during, and after filming. This can include hiring cast and crew, making sure everyone has whatever's needed to get the job done, and finding ways to pay for the movie (which usually means asking for millions and millions of dollars from investors). Whenever you see an actor listed as a producer, odds are that he or she simply kicked in a lot of money to go toward the movie's budget.

Some of Gaiman's duties as producer included suggesting locations for filming and finding a screenwriter to adapt his novel after he declined an offer to write the script.

"I generally tried to help while not getting in the way," Gaiman says about his producing job. "I guess a lot of that goes back to watching my friend Alan Moore and his films, where his attitude really was, 'I'm not going to have anything to do with it. I'm off on the side here. Just make a movie.' And the movies that got made, I felt at least, were really wrong—*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* in par-

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By Karen O'Connor

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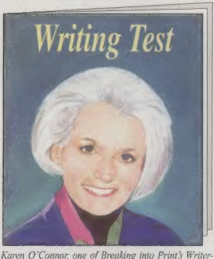


*Karen O'Connor, one of Breaking into Print's Writer-instructors, has written hundreds of Articles for national magazines and more than 50 books, two of which are* Help, Lord! I'm Having a Senior Moment *(Regal Books, 2002) and* Getting Old Ain't For Wimps: Inspirations and Stories to Warm Your Heart and Tickle Your Funny Bone *(Harvest House Publishers, 2004).*

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*Tristan tries to win the heart of the distant Victoria, played by Sienna Miller, by going on a quest to find a falling star Others also seek the star for their own purposes.*

ticular. I thought if Alan had actually been involved, maybe they would have been better. There's no guarantee, but they could have been.

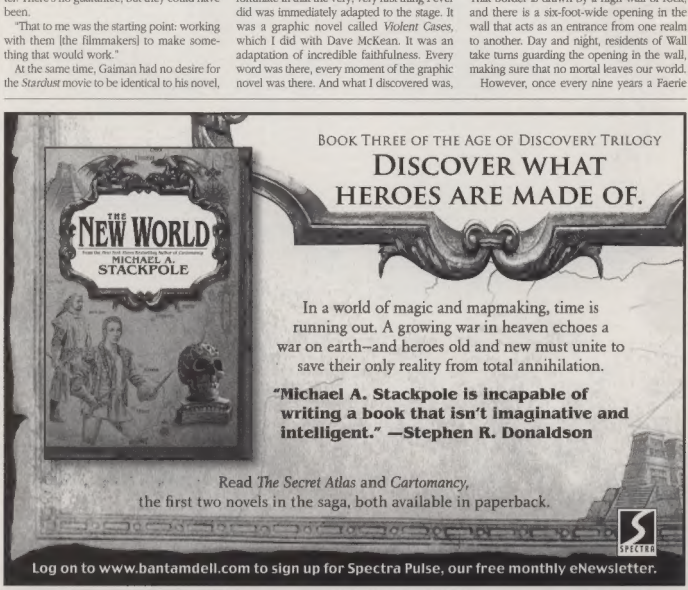
"That to me was the starting point: working with them [the filmmakers] to make something that would work."

At the same time, Gaiman had no desire for the *Stardust* movie to be identical to his novel, based on his previous experience with adaptations. "When I was a young man, I was very fortunate in that the very, very first thing I ever did was immediately adapted to the stage. It was a graphic novel called *Violent Cases*, which I did with Dave McKean. It was an adaptation of incredible faithfulness. Every word was there, every moment of the graphic novel was there. And what I discovered was, it wasn't very good.

"And I remember sitting in the audience being puzzled and fascinated. The fortunate thing was realizing that the entire reason it wasn't terribly good was that they hadn't translated it. They hadn't made it something that happened on the stage. What they'd done instead was take something from one medium and essentially transliterate it straight into another. And that was a wonderful and very salutary lesson to learn at precisely that stage of my development, because it meant that I was suddenly a lot less prissy about adaptations. You can be more faithful by finding out what works for a specific medium. Film is not a novel, and a stage play is not a graphic novel. And moments that were huge and important in the graphic novel became meaningless because they appeared in a second or two on a stage. Nobody went and found a dramatic equivalent for them that would have worked in drama. So that was where I came from."

*Stardust* is a fairy tale for adults. The novel is set in Victorian times and begins in the town of Wall, which Gaiman has described as being on the border "between England and Faerie." That border is drawn by a high wall of rock, and there is a six-foot-wide opening in the wall that acts as an entrance from one realm to another. Day and night, residents of Wall take turns guarding the opening in the wall, making sure that no mortal leaves our world.

However, once every nine years a Faerie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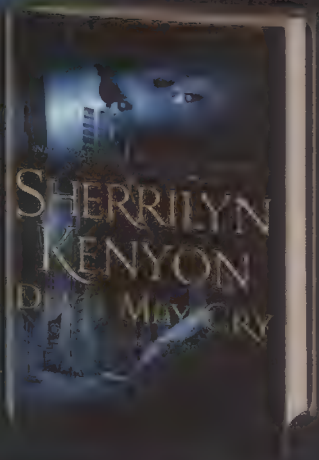


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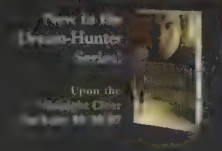

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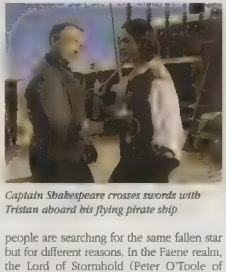
Market is held in the valley on the other side of the wall. At this time, everyone may pass freely from one side of the wall to the other. As a young man, Dunstan Thorn goes to the Faerie Market, where he meets a mysterious woman at a stall selling magical crystal flowers. At her request, he returns that night for a lover's tryst. Nine months later, a baby is pushed through the opening in the wall with a note naming him Tristan Thorn. Dunstan has already married his mortal sweetheart, and they take Tristan into their home as their son.

As a young man, Tristan (played by newcomer Charlie Cox) falls in love with Victoria (played by Sienna Miller of *Factory Girl*, *Casanova*), a girl who also lives in the town of Wall. One night, he declares his love for her. But Victoria isn't an easy catch. When she spots a falling star in the night sky, she tells Tristan that she'll marry him only if he retrieves that falling star and brings it back to her. Eager to please, Tristan knows this means he must find a way to pass through the opening in the wall and journey through the land of Faerie, because that's where the star has fallen.

What Tristan doesn't know is that other people are searching for the same fallen star but for different reasons. In the Faerie realm, the Lord of Stormhold (Peter O'Toole of *Lawrence of Arabia*) dies, and three of his sons have already killed four of their siblings in an attempt to gain control of the kingdom. The fallen star will determine who becomes the next Lord. At the same time, an evil witch (played by Michelle Pfeiffer of *White Oleander*, *What Lies Beneath*) pursues the fallen star, because it has the ability to restore her youth and power.



*Captain Shakespeare crosses swords with Tristan aboard his flying pirate ship*

"I love pretty much everything," Gaiman says about the film version of *Stardust*. "Would I have made this movie? No, this is Matthew's movie. Do I love what Matthew's done? Absolutely."

Gaiman's referring to director Matthew Vaughn (*Layer Cake*), who happens to be a longtime friend. Gaiman had given a copy of his novel to Vaughn, whose wife read it first and sang its praises.

"Matthew was thinking about doing it just as a producer and at one point talked to Terry Gilliam about directing it. But Terry had just come off of *Brothers Grimm* and didn't want to do another fairy tale, nor really could anyone blame him for not wanting that.

"Matthew was meant to be directing *X-Men 3*, but it fell through. He didn't feel like the money or the support from the studio were there, and he came home. I got a phone call from him the following day, saying, 'I want to get moving on *Stardust*. I want to direct it myself.' It was obvious he was going to need a scriptwriter. I really didn't want to do it

# FALL 2007 TV PREVIEWS

By Ben Nelson

It's probably due to the breakout success of *Heroes* and the continuing popularity of *Lost* that the major networks are bringing a slew of fantasy series to TV this fall. They're coming just in the nick of time, because the only returning series are *Heroes*, *Lost* (in spring 2008), *Ghost Whisperer*, *Smallville*, and *Supernatural*.

NBC leads the way with three new fantasy series on the fall lineup. First, the network revives ***The Bionic Woman,*** which first aired in the 1970s. This time, Jaime Sommers is a bartender struggling to make ends meet while taking care of her teen sister. Although Jaime survives a serious car accident, both her legs and one arm must be amputated. Technology makes her whole again by replacing flesh with metal. Part human and part machine, she discovers she has superhuman powers, thanks to her new body.

Also on NBC is ***Journeyman,*** a new time travel series. Dan Vasser is an everyday Joe with a good job and happy family life. Without warning, he's suddenly able to travel into the past, where he meets a past love who died in a plane crash. To make matters more complicated, he's also able to come back to the present day. His journeys have the power to help or hurt others, which is something he must contend with while trying to figure out how to balance the impact on his personal life.

The final NBC series is ***Chuck,*** a story about a geeky nerd whose life changes drastically when a friend (who happens to be a CIA agent) sends an e-mail message that downloads the world's most important spy secrets directly into Chuck's brain. Overnight, he becomes the U.S. government's greatest weapon. What happens when a geek has to fill the shoes of someone like James Bond?

Another new series on ABC is ***Pushing Daisies,*** which blends romance, crime procedural and fantasy. Ned is a baker who's had a special gift since childhood: he can bring the dead back to life just by touching them once. However, if he touches anyone a second time, they're dead again. This is a cruel irony because years ago he brought his childhood sweetheart back to life—and he can never touch her again. Ned works with a private investigator to solve murder mysteries by bringing victims back so they can name their killers.

Look for ***Eli Stone,*** a midseason replacement series on ABC about law and spirituality. Eli Stone is a hard-hearted attorney who begins hallucinating. He rejects his doctor's analysis of an aneurysm in favor of believing his destiny is to become a spiritual prophet. In the meantime, he exchanges high-profile legal cases for defending underdogs in court.

CBS jumps on the vampire bandwagon with a new series called ***Moonlight.*** Mick St. John is a private investigator who was bitten on his honeymoon night by his own wife 60 years ago. He's spent his life trying to do the right thing, even though he walks with one foot in the world of vampires and the other foot in the world of humans. Now, he has a new human girlfriend and is afraid of getting too close.

Fox's ***New Amsterdam*** is about a mysterious immortal, John Amsterdam, who makes his living as a New York homicide detective. In 1642, he was a Dutch soldier in the colony of New Amsterdam (which has since become New York City). When he sacrificed himself to save the life of a Native American girl, she cast a spell to give him immortality. This means he won't age until he finds his true love. One day he suffers a heart attack and believes he has somehow stumbled upon his true love—he just doesn't know who she is yet. So when Amsterdam combs the streets of New York for killers, he's also looking for the woman who is bound to change his life and let him become mortal at last.

On CW (the blend of former networks The WB and UPN), look for ***Reaper,*** a new series about the devil coming to collect his dues. All his life, Sam has had permission from his parents to do as little as he pleases, while they've pushed his brother Keith to excel. When Sam turns 21, he finds out why: when he was born, his parents sold his soul to Satan, who now shows up and tells Sam he has a new job: hunting down evil souls who have escaped from Hell and putting them back where they belong. In this comedy, Sam is given a different tool to use every week (like a Dirt Devil vacuum), and his friends come along to help. Sam soon realizes that being a bounty hunter for Satan is a lot more fun than working at his boring day job and playing video games.

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mostly because I was at that point up to my neck in *Beowulf*, and I worried that I wasn't going to be able to give *Stardust* the attention it deserved. Also, I felt with this project, Matthew had a very definite vision for the tone and the kind of movie he wanted to make, which I thought was fine and terrific but I also knew that my vision for *Stardust* was the book. I was thinking I needed somebody really smart, and I needed a woman Matthew's sensibilities are incredibly male. I wanted someone who could make the romance work as well as the other stuff."

Once again, Gaiman found who he needed through his network of friends. Jane Goldman is a novelist, and Gaiman learned through casual conversation with her husband that she was interested in writing a screenplay.

"She did a first-draft script," Gaiman says. "I read it and had some comments. Then [Jane and Matthew] did a second draft, and for that one I went over to England, and Jane and I acted out the entire script for Matthew, again, making comments on the way. And that was the script they started shooting with. Things would change as it went, which is the process of filmmaking. Budget things happen—that's the way it goes. There's nothing really that you can do. We had a lion and a unicorn fight, and we couldn't afford it, because it would have been 90 seconds and cost $1.5 million."

In Gaiman's novel, while Tristan travels through the land of Faerie, he comes upon a lion and a unicorn fighting over a crown. Tristan quickly sees that the lion is giving the unicorn a good thrashing. Taking pity, Tristan intervenes by picking up the crown and placing it on the lion's head. Confused but satisfied, the lion exits. The grateful unicorn joins Tristan on his journey.

"So the lion and the unicorn fight had to go," Gaiman laments. "Now the unicorn just sort of wanders in."

On the flip side of the coin, there are many things the movie successfully captures from the novel. "One of the things I love in *Stardust* is the way they got the humor of the book," Gaiman says. "The princes of Stormhold who die, hang around, and comment, which always seemed funny and kind of sweet when I was writing the novel, are absolutely hilarious.

"I love the fact that it doesn't feel like any thing else. It's not a sequel. It's not *Lord of the Rings*. It's not even *The Princess Bride*."

In regard to casting, Gaiman says, "It's amazing. We're looking at Robert De Niro [who plays a pirate captain], Michelle Pfeiffer, Peter O'Toole, Claire Danes—wonderful, wonderful people. And they're great.

"What I love best is probably Tristan's emotional journey. Both the film and the book are romances about a boy becoming a man. The thing that I love best is Charlie Cox actually making that convincing. He starts out a gawky, awkward boy, not really sure who he is or what he's doing. And he ends the film a man having won the heart of his true love and having conquered a world. That, for me, is the most important thing: that the emotional through-line is still there. And young Charlie Cox, who nobody has ever heard of—he's absolutely wonderful in this.

*Lamia, played by Michelle Pfeiffer, is an evil witch who seeks the star's heart to make her young once more.*

In light of his work as a screenwriter, producer, and director, Gaiman doesn't consider any challenge he's faced in the movie industry to be nearly as daunting as the task of writing a new novel. "The greatest challenge is just the fact that you start out with this idea about a boy and a girl and a falling star, and then you have nothing but blank pages ahead of you," Gaiman says. "Nobody had written a fairy tale for adults, probably since *The Princess Bride*. I felt like I was sort of wandering around the unknown. Turning something into a film—yes, it's kind of impossible, and you have to raise $70 million, and it will either happen or it won't. You try and make it happen as best you can with congenial people and doing it as pleasantly as possible. Whereas, writing the novel, it's you against this white void, and you have to fill it with what happens. It's always monumentally difficult."

Perhaps Gaiman will have a chance to breathe a little easier as he delves deeper into helping to translate his novels to film. To date, *Coraline* is in preproduction, and there are also plans to film *Neverwhere* and *Mirrormask*.

But for now, Gaiman describes "a future in which *Stardust* comes out, is incredibly successful, in which people for the rest of my life come up to me and say, 'I loved *Stardust*. It was like *The Princess Bride*. It was funny. It was moving. It was tender. It was exciting. Michelle Pfeiffer was so scary. Robert De Niro was so funny. It's such a lovely movie, and it's a real fairy story being done really well and properly. I really loved it.' By the way, the book was better."

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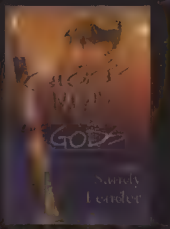


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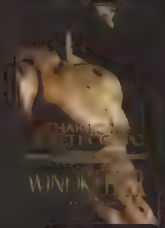

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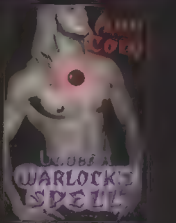


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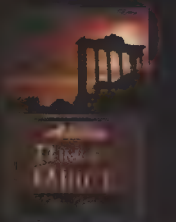

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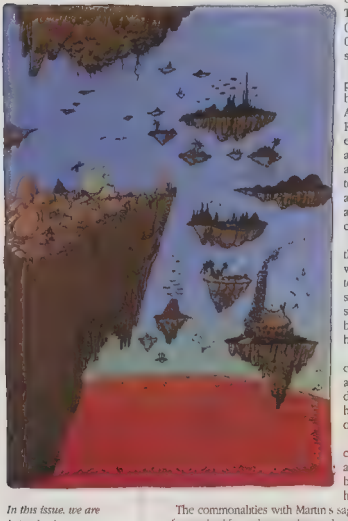
By Paul Witcover & Jeff VanderMeer

# Two young authors follow in the footsteps of George R.R. Martin and J.K. Rowling.

A number of writers deserve credit for moving epic fantasy into its current post-Tolkien phase, but two of the most influential have surely been George R.R. Martin and J.K. Rowling, whose seminal works first appeared in 1996 and 1997, respectively. My sense is that Martin's influence will prove to be the more salubrious, and I think two new novels illustrate why. Both are strong books by gifted, ambitious young authors, one is a first novel, the other a first foray into fantasy by a writer heretofore known for historical fiction.

David Anthony Durham's ***Acacia: Book One of the War with the Mein*** (Doubleday, New York, hardcover, 416 pp., $26.95, ISBN 978-0-385-50606-9), is plainly indebted to Martin's grittily realistic, psychologically acute updating of Tolkien, while Patrick Rothfuss's **The Name of the Wind; The Kingkiller Chronicle: Day One** (Daw, New York, hardcover, 662 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-7564-0407-9), draws on multiple sources, Martin among them, but most strongly, to its detriment, from Rowling.



*In this issue, we are introducing a new column on graphic novels by Jeff VanderMeer. This illustration is from* Dungeon Twilight, Volume 2, Armageddon

Let's look at *Acacia* first, a vivid, vigorous, altogether accomplished fantasy by the author of *Pride of Carthage*, a well-received historical novel about Rome's great adversary, Hannibal. Durham's Acacia is a vast empire that is far weaker than it seems, not unlike Rome in the early days of the barbarian incursions. Built on treachery, lies, and a staggering, ongoing betrayal, the empire is feared and hated by its subjects and vassal states. One implacable enemy, a northern people called the Mein, has been plotting for centuries to avenge an ancient wrong. Now, led by a brilliant, charismatic, and unscrupulous general, Hanish, the Mein have entered into an alliance with barbarians from still farther north to topple the Acacian empire and rule in its place.

When the Acacian emperor is assassinated, chaos ensues, and the emperor's four young children are sent into separate exiles where, it is hoped, they will find safety and peace. Such is not to be. One child, Mena, finds her way to a distant country where she is worshipped as the avatar of a goddess; Aliver, the eldest son, is fostered with a warrior tribe, another son, Dariel, is raised by pirates; while the eldest daughter, Corinn, is captured and held prisoner by Hanish.

Durham is especially fine at tracing the development of these children from pampered princes and princesses into young men and women who have been hardened by their history but not rendered inhuman by it (an exception here may be Corinn, who finds herself growing attracted to Hanish; her love for the man who ordered her father's murder twists her in intriguing ways).

Aliver's only hope in retaking the throne lies in an ancient sorcery, commonly dismissed as myth, which turns out to be all too real. Its adepts, the Santoth, speak a corrupted form of the language used by the creator god to call all things into being, their spells always have unforeseen, uncontrollable, and often highly destructive effects.

The commonalities with Martin's saga are obvious. Like Martin, Durham's focus is on the nitty-gritty of everyday life on human desires, loves, and hates, and not on esoteric magical realities. Although magic is central to the plot and to the world Durham has built, he follows Martin in elevating character over magic, magic is anything but attractive here- it's a necessary evil. That suspicious view of magic, both in itself and as a literary device, which was present in Tolkien but lost in so many of his imitators, Martin picked up and dusted off, and Durham is wise to adopt it. This is a novel whose virtues far outweigh its occasional missteps, and I recommend it without hesitation.

My recommendation of *The Name of the Wind* is more guarded. Patrick Rothfuss has talent to burn,

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and thus unusually accomplished first novel augurs a successful career. However

Here we have an orphaned boy whose parents have been murdered by evil sorcery and whose natural aptitude for magic earns him admission to an eldritch academy where his lowly origins and stunning talents make him a target of envy and malice on the part of less-gifted students and professors, though persons of real value instantly recognize his worth. Said boy leads an almost supernaturally blessed existence, for despite his tragic history, or perhaps because of it, everything conspires to elevate him above his fellow human beings, and every setback turns out to be a stroke of luck in disguise. Sound familiar?

So perfect is this boy, so resourceful, that one is compelled to see in him all the classic attributes of a "Mary Sue"—a character who exists largely as a wish-fulfillment fantasy on the part of the author. Harry Potter shows many of the characteristics of a Mary Sue, and so, unfortunately, does Kvothe, the full-time hero and part-time narrator of *The Name of the Wind*.

The novel opens with Kote, as he calls himself running a nondescript inn whose rustic patrons discuss rumored attacks by demonic creatures, soon the reality of the rumors is proved, which leads to the appearance of a man known as "the Chronicler," who recognizes Kote as Kvothe the all-but mythical adventurer, magician, musician, actor reaver slayer, butterfly collector, etc., and prevails upon him to dictate a history of his life to date. Thus sections of the novel set at the inn, told in the third person, are interspersed with sections narrated by the self-proclaimed genius Kvothe, whose smug, often-hectoring style demonstrates the dangers inherent in making a Mary Sue a first-person narrator.

Obviously, having a Mary Sue as a lead character is no impediment to commercial success; quite the contrary. However, it is most definitely an impediment to literary success, and Rothfuss's editor did her author no favors by indulging this aspect of the novel. One hopes that Rothfuss will live up to the obligations of his talent by curbing such self-sabotaging instincts in the future. His books will be the better for it.

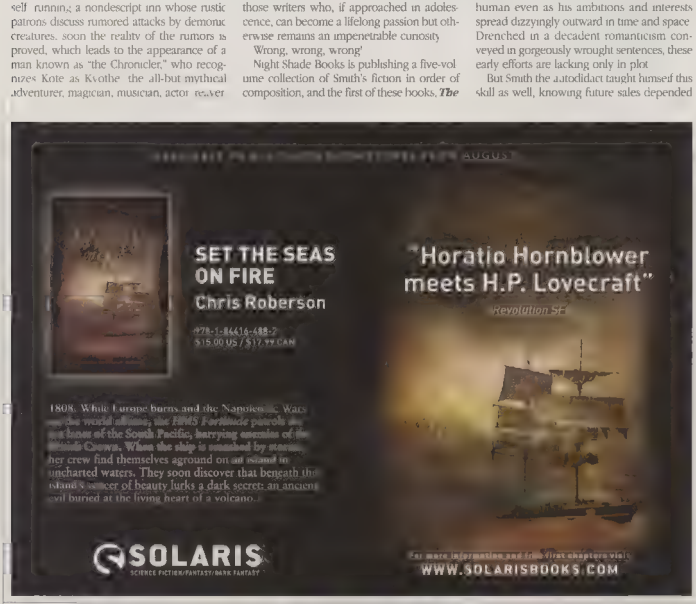
I'm embarrassed to admit that, up until now, I'd never read anything by Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961), the *Weird Tales* poet and writer who was a close friend and correspondent of H.P. Lovecraft. Perhaps I feared that, like his two most famous fellow travelers through the pages of *Weird Tales*, Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, he was one of those writers who, if approached in adolescence, can become a lifelong passion but otherwise remains an impenetrable curiosity.

Wrong, wrong, wrong!

Night Shade Books is publishing a five-volume collection of Smith's fiction in order of composition, and the first of these books, ***The End of the Story: The Collected Fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith, Volume One*** (Night Shade Books, San Francisco, hardcover, 400 pp., $39.95, ISBN: 978-1-59780-028-0), superbly edited by Scott Connors and Ron Hilger to reflect authorial intent, and ably introduced by Ramsey Campbell, offers a remarkable glimpse of an original talent finding its distinctive voice and subject matter.

The volume begins with what are really not stories at all but prose poems or character studies, dense and ornate fashionings of language, image, and sensation that owe as much to Baudelaire as to Poe. In addition to the glittering language, which is so precise despite the occasional florid excess that I feel sure Klarkash-Ton (as Lovecraft dubbed him) must have been a formidable poet, these pieces are haunted by regret for choices made and loves lost, as in "A Night in Malnéant," whose tormented hero, fleeing the memory of his deceased lover, only succeeds in encountering it on a disturbingly vast scale. Loss and regret will become ever-more-essential components of Smith's work in this volume, permeating it and grounding it in the human even as his ambitions and interests spread dizzyingly outward in time and space. Drenched in a decadent romanticism conveyed in gorgeously wrought sentences, these early efforts are lacking only in plot.

But Smith the autodidact taught himself this skill as well, knowing future sales depended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on it He hits his stride in "The Tale of Satam pra Zeiros," published in 1931, a tale of two thieves in quest of a mythical treasure Here one can glimpse the origins of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser in Smith's combination of breezy wit, adventure, and intense, grotesque horror

In other stories Smith turns his talents to science fiction .. of a sort Tales like "The Immeasurable Horror" and "Marooned in Andromeda," effective though they may be, are really just horror stories that cloak themselves in science fictional trappings. But in "The Metamorphosis of the World," Smith writes chillingly and convincingly of an alien attempt to terraform the Earth prior to an invasion. one of the first fictional accounts of terraforming that I'm aware of Even better is "The Monster of the Prophecy" in which a suicidal man is brought to a distant planet in order to facilitate an ancient prophecy, only to discover love among the aliens

*The End of the Story* is a terrific introduction to the work of a writer whose wild imagination and darkly ironic insights into cosmic and human nature seem almost as fresh today as they must have in the twenties and thirties when these stories first appeared

The doomed, claustrophobic atmosphere of a disintegrating marriage is conveyed with stark, often brutal realism in Lucius Shepard's grimly powerful new novel, ***Softspoken*** (Night Shade Books, San Francisco, hardcover, 196 pp., $23.95, ISBN. 978-1-59780-073-0), a southern gothic ghost story that brings to mind Faulkner's dictum that "the past isn't dead; it isn't even past."

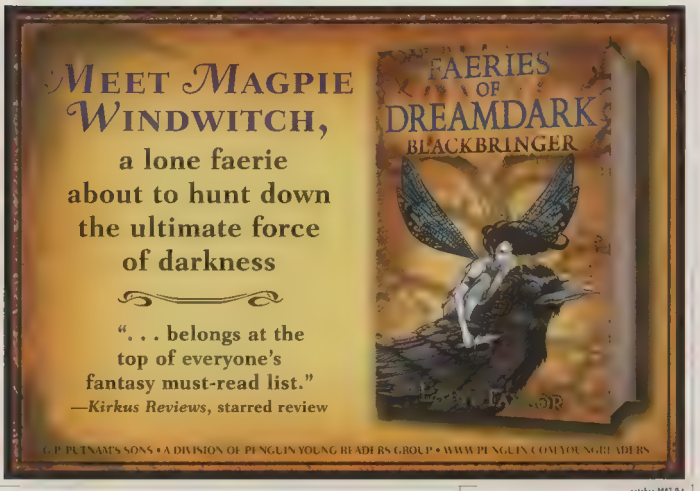
Sanie and Jackson Bullard have exchanged the urban comforts of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. for rural South Carolina and the antebellum manse in which Jackson was raised, a shambolic affair afflicted with physical and spintual decay. Cooped up in the den of his deceased dad, Jackson studies for his bar exam, leaving a bored and frustrated Sanie to wander about the house and its environs, wondering if her marriage can be saved and trying to convince herself that her dreams of becoming a writer are attainable Also present in the house are Jackson's siblings Will, who, like some shabby Carlos Castaneda, pursues a quasi-mystical journey powered by peyote and rough sex, and Louise, who, like a shattered survivor of unspecified abuse, creeps through the shadows, timid as a mouse

And then there are the ghosts

At first, Sanie encounters a single voice, little more than a whisper, repeating her name and expressing a "wish you could see me" More startling than frightening, the voice soon becomes an annoyance, and Sanie's quick acceptance of this supernatural intrusion, and her blasé reaction to it, mark *Softspoken* as a different kind of ghost story, which in fact it turns out to be With Shepard at the helm, with his genius for carrying readers into disturbingly weird places and making them feel as though no other destination were possible, how could it be otherwise?

An experiment with Will's peyote gives Sanie a glimpse of more ghosts wispy images that could be from the future as well as the past, and a dark vortex that threatens to swallow the house and its inhabitants Sanie sees herself as an outsider, protected by distance and objectivity, but in fact she is already part of what she observes Although she tells herself that it's her loyalty to Jackson, even in the absence of love, that stops her from leaving and holds her back from an affair with a local musician, Frank Dean, the truth is stranger and more horrible than she could imagine

Writers of superhero novels, even if their intent is serious, often seem to feel a bit embarrassed to be writing about men and women in capes, masks, and tights. They adopt a campy, jokey style, leavened with hipster irony, or a grim and portentous one, seasoned with violence: in other words, it's either 60s-era *Batman* TV show or *The Dark Knight Returns* These qualities are undoubtedly important elements of the superhero



MEET MAGPIE WINDWITCH,
a lone faerie about to hunt down the ultimate force of darkness
"... belongs at the top of everyone's fantasy must-read list."
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review
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genre, but in addition to them, the best comics are infused with a distinctive psychological complexity that few novelists have successfully captured. If superhero novels are like, well, superheroes, then novelists tackling the form have all too often been like overmatched supervillains destined to go down in defeat even if they do put up an entertaining fight on the way to the floor.

First-time novelist Austin Grossman battles his superhero nemesis and creation ***Soon I Will Be Invincible*** (Pantheon, New York, hardcover, 288 pp. $22.95, ISBN: 978-0375423611) to a standstill in what is easily the best pure comic-book novel I've seen. By "pure" I mean a novel set in a universe that contains superheroes, takes them seriously as sentient entities, biological or otherwise, thinks in a thoroughgoing way about the social and physical milieu in which such entities could exist, and is knowledgeable about comic-book history.

Grossman's universe is instantly recognizable as a mixture of DC- and Marvel-inspired heroes and tropes. The novel opens with an evil-genius, Doctor Impossible, who suffers from MHD (Malign Hypercognition Disorder, an affliction peculiar to those with IQs in the 300-and-above range), scheming to escape once again from prison, where he was placed two years ago, for the twelfth time, by his nemesis and creation, CoreFire, who possesses most of Superman's powers. The next chapter shifts to the point of view of a female cyborg called Fatale, who has been asked to join the Champions, a superhero team modeled on the Avengers/Justice League of America. Following the death of its previous cyborg member Galatea, the team disbanded; now, faced with the mysterious disappearance of CoreFire, the team is getting back together.

The novel jumps between chapters narrated by Doctor Impossible and Fatale. Fatale's chapters are the less successful of the two, there is nothing really extraordinary about her other than the technology that has elevated her into the ranks of "the enhanced, gifted, or otherwise-superpowered." Yes, there are mysteries to be solved as to her origin, and romantic feelings toward fellow Champion Blackwolf, known as "The Ultimate Crime-fighter" (three guesses who he's modeled on) to be explored, but Fatale, despite all her prowess, seems merely ordinary—though in fairness, perhaps that's Grossman's point.

What makes the novel memorable is the voice of Doctor Impossible. The doc is self-aware enough to realize that he is in the grips of MHD, but like some sort of super-Tourette sufferer he just can't help continually attempting to conquer the world via a succession of wacky if deadly doomsday devices, all the while spouting embarrassing clichés. That's played sometimes for laughs, but, remarkably, Grossman makes it poignant too, and gives Impossible real charisma to boot. Here's the

**Mouse Guard Fall 1152,** David Peterson, Archaia Studios Press, Fort Lee, NJ, hardcover, 192 pp., $24.95, ISBN 978-1-932386-57-8. This sumptuous hardcover collection of Peterson's lovingly illustrated Mouse Guard comic should be a must-buy for anyone who loves musketeers-like medieval fantasy. For decades, the vaunted Mouse Guard has protected its citizens from external threats. But now they must deal with treachery, war, and even giant (to them) crabs. An extraordinary attention to detail defines the art, while the storyline is exciting and classic, with betrayal, intrigue, and several reversals of fortune. Readers will be left wanting even more Mouse Guard adventures.

**Death by Chocolate,** David Yurkovich, Top Shelf Productions, Portland, OR, oversized trade paperback, 120 pp., $14.95, ISBN 978-1-891830-92-1. The people who brought readers Alan Moore's *lost Girls* have now released something almost as decadent: Yurkovich's "Death by Chocolate" series in a special new edition. The story of an unlikely superhero that, due to a freak accident, is made of chocolate, both sends up the superhero genre and pays tribute to it. Agent Swete is a member of the FBI's Food Crimes Division, and uniquely qualified to investigate bizarre, food-related mysteries. In this edition, readers get new material that tells the tale of how Agent Swete became the chocolate avenger. There is also an essay by the creator, and Yurkovich has re-mastered every page of this unique series.

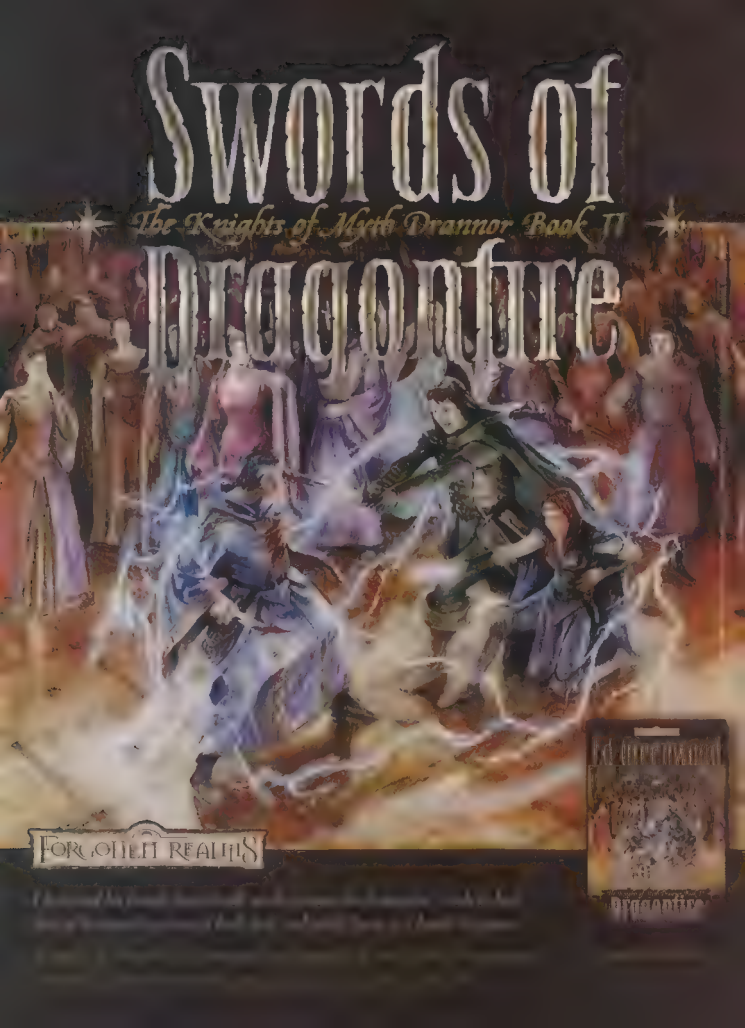
**Wormwood,** Gentleman Corpse: Birds, Bees, Blood, and Beer, Ben Templesmith, IDW Publishing, San Diego, CA, oversized trade paperback, 124 pp., $19.99, ISBN: 978-1600-100475. Luxuriating in its Lovecraft/Decadent origins, Templesmith's witty and hallucinogenic *Wormwood* (indeed a gentleman corpse) hangs out with a ghost cop and battles tentacular horrors that tend to assail him fungally in bars and other shady places. Even the most horrific of supernatural scenes is leavened with humor, while the art and coloring are phantasmagorical in the best sense. Anyone who appreciates the cool appeal of squidly assailants and mushroom monstrosities will appreciate this anti-*Wonderland* noir funhouse of a book. This first volume collects the initial four issues of the stand-alone comic. It also includes a number of amazing sketches and full-page paintings.

**The Secret History, Book One: Genesis and Book Two: Castle of the Djinns,** Jean-Pierre Pecau, Igor Kordeey, Carole Beau, Archaia Studios Press, Fort Lee, NJ, hardcover, 48 pp., $5.95, ISBNs. 978-1-932386-38-6, 978-1-932386-41-6. Set in the time of the Pharaohs and old Jerusalem, these first two books, originally published in France, extrapolate from what we know about the ancient world to create a riveting storyline based on rune stones, a magic possibly responsible for plague, division, and war. The series as a whole works off of the idea that unseen forces have shaped the fate of Western civilization. Truly mind-blowing in scope, the *Secret History* will eventually cover Rome, Napoleon, and World War II. Fans of clandestine plots, alternate history, action-adventure, fantasy, and intricately detailed art will all enjoy this series.

**Dungeon: Twilight, Vol. 1: Dragon Cemetery and Vol. 2: Armageddon,** Joann Sfar and Lewis Trondheim, Nantier Beall Minoustchine Publishing, New York, NY, trade paperback, 96/92 pp., $14.95, 978-1-561634-60-6, 978-1-561634-77-4. Trondheim and Sfar have created the ultimate swords-and-sorcery adventure with their Dungeon series, the latest volumes of which feature the "Twilight" of the dungeon, in which a lizard-like dust king and his rabbit knight sidekick go forth and encounter monsters, invisible creatures, lost civilizations, and even a protective mother. Dungeon parodies heroic fantasy in hilarious fashion while also offering exciting battle scenes, deep and interesting characters, and a complex plot. If you like fantasy, humor, or intrigue, this series is for you. One scene in particular will make your jaw drop in appreciation of the amazing imagination at play here.

# Swords of Dragonfire

*The Knights of Myth Drannor Book II*



doc on his early experiments at Harvard "I was building another science, my science, wild science, robots and lasers and disembodied brains. A science that buzzed and glowed; it wanted to do things. It could get up and walk, fly, fight, sprout garish glowing creations in the remotest parts of the world. domes and towers and architectural fever dreams. And it was angry. It was mad science." If you don't experience a little frisson upon reading that, this may not be the book for you. As for me, I'll follow that voice anywhere

**Paul Witcover**

***Deadstock,*** Jeffrey Thomas, Solaris, Nottingham, UK, mass market paperback, 414 pp., $7.99. ISBN 978-1-84416-447-9

For years, Jeffrey Thomas has been writing and publishing stories and novels in Punktown, a city that he first created as a teenager. Punktown is perhaps the most fantastical SF setting in recent memory. Yes, it's a city on another planet, but one populated by any number of Lovecraftian-inspired creatures, which contributes to a dark fantasy feel, often supernatural in nature. In *Deadstock*, Thomas ups the ante considerably by adding noir mystery to his battalion of influences. It's a remarkably successful hybrid. Jeremy Stake, private eye and war veteran, takes on a client whose company makes creatures for the wealthy. The case? To find the intelligent doll of his client's daughter before it becomes a threat to its owner, and Punktown. The doll gains strength and powers as the novel progresses. Meanwhile, Stake isn't any more normal than the people he works for—and it's not just his uncanny ability to mimic people that makes him eccentric. As in any good noir novel, Stake gets in over his head and by the last third of the book, the reader realizes that anyone living in Punktown, no matter how experienced, is going to get mired in the secret life of the city. Pulp-infused, filled with pulse-pounding chases, horrors, and mystery thrills, *Deadstock* is the perfect high-powered vehicle to showcase Thomas's eccentric and lovingly haphazard city.

***Dangerous Offspring*** by Steph Swainston, Eos, New York, 336 pp., trade paperback, $13.95. ISBN 978-0-06-075389-4

Giant insects again threaten the fantasy milieu of Fourlands previously fleshed out by Steph Swainston in *The Year of Our War* and *No Present Like Time*. Jant Comet, Swainston's complex anti-hero, must maneuver through a situation fraught with at least as much danger as in the first two installments. The lord of the immortals, Frost, means to implement a plan to defeat the giant insects once and for all, but the consequences of failure are enormous. Meanwhile, the daughter of Jant's friend Lightning has gone missing. Jant's fortunes are framed by these two events. Ignoring an ill-considered opening dream sequence, *Dangerous Offspring* delivers the most pleasure when it combines action-adventure with a beautifully surreal approach to imagery and description. The hell-bent-for-leather ride that is Chapter 8 with its reanimated horses and bizarre bazaar might be the best thing Swainston has ever written. Throughout the novel, Swainston juxtaposes gritty detail with a sense of the alien that sometimes verges on the incomprehensible. Jant cannot in any sense be thought of as likeable, but he's infinitely fascinating as he navigates through a constantly shifting ethical and physical landscape. In the end, Swainston provides few easy answers but the novel does have a satisfying sense of closure.

***Ilario: The Lion's Eye,*** Mary Gentle, Eos, New York, 320 pp., trade paperback, $14.95. ISBN. 978-0-06-082183-8

The protagonist of Mary Gentle's *Ilario* could be called an anti-hero only in the sense

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of people's reaction to him. he's a hermaphrodite and this shapes his view of the world so totally that inasmuch as *Ilano* is an alternate history novel it is also a story about a person living incognito, almost as a spy in his own skin. The history invoked here is that of the Rome and Carthage the author explored in her previous book, *Ash*. Among other oddities, a strange darkness bespoils the sky above Carthage and golems are a reality. Fleeing Europe mostly to evade parents who don't want his true nature to become a dangerous embarrassment, Ilano enters Carthage only to immediately be taken advantage of by a customs officer, who sells him into slavery. What follows are a series of set pieces or what I would call "tests" for Ilano, in which only his wits, guts, and imagination can save him. It's not so much that Gentle forces her character into these situations, but that his essential nature and his striving to be a painter create the situations. In a sense, all of the weirdness of Gentle's setting is secondary to the utter normalcy of Ilano- except for his dual female-male nature, he is much like any of us. Flawed, utterly human narrators can't be portrayed more perfectly than this, and through steamy sex scenes, court intrigue, blackmail, pregnancy, and much else, the reader will pay rapt attention, rooting for the eponymous narrator.

***Vacation,*** Jeremy C. Shipp, Raw Dog Screaming Press, Hyattsville, MD, 158 pp., trade paperback, $13.95, ISBN 978-1-933293-41-7

Every once in a while I read a debut novel that isn't like anything else I've ever read before. Jeremy C. Shipp's surreal fantasy *Vacation* falls into that category. Part Voltaire-like satire, part Philip K. Dick mind-trip, the novel follows the adventures of Bernard Johnson, a rich scion who goes on what he calls The Vacation. It turns out to be a yearlong journey into a secret world of fantastical encounters and odd dealings with mythical people and drug lords. Blackbeard, Odin, and God all make appearances, but in very unexpected ways. The matter-of-fact quality to Johnson's narration of ever-more-insane events proves an effective method of helping the reader suspend disbelief. This is in part because Johnson is a kind of innocent—he may be part of the culture that creates the idea of The Vacation, but he also stands outside of that culture. By the time Johnson is living in a coffin and taking extended stints at a bizarre hospital before being reunited with his "tour" group, readers will be as indoctrinated and as accepting of the surreal situations as Johnson himself. What could have been merely "gonzo" fantasy is instead both serious and deep. Shipp displays a fantastical devotion to taking his character and situations just one step further than most writers.

***The Music of Razors,*** Cameron Rogers, Del Rey, New York, 314 pp., trade paperback, $13.95, ISBN 978-0-345-49319-4

Another debut novel, this one by an Australian writer, occupies a very traditional, often satisfying space between historical fiction and angel-fueled fantasy. Cameron Rogers has imagined a milieu connected by odd passageways between places and times. Henry Lockrose is plucked from the 1840s to be used as a collector of human souls in a battle between Heaven and Hell. Kept alive through the use of angel-bone, Lockrose focuses in on four-year-old Walter, only to be thwarted by a monster sent to protect the boy. Merged with the monster, Walter must try to help his sister, now the focus of Lockrose's attention. The most interesting aspect of this debut is the duality of Walter once the monster has merged with him, and the conflicted nature of Lockrose's character. Although readers may experience a sense of déja vu at familiar elements, the writing is sometimes excellent. The delights of *The Music of Razors* are subtle and low-key, but it rewards careful reading.

**Jeff VanderMeer**

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things are on their way to Earth
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# NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

**Ironside,** by Holly Black, McElderry Books, April 2007 After foolishly proclaiming her love for her faerie boyfriend Roiben in the middle of his coronation as the Unseelie Court's new king, Kaye is dispatched on an impossible quest: to find a faerie who cannot lie This quest leads her into hazards aplenty, including a murderous attempt by the Seelie Queen to reclaim her errant knight and unite the courts under one ruler In the middle of this, Kaye also sets out to find the human girl with whom she was swapped as a child, even if it costs Kaye the only family she's ever known In this sequel to *Tithe* and *Valiant,* Holly Black revisits an edgy, fascinating world of magic and treachery, where nothing is ever quite as it seems. Black is fast becoming a major new voice in urban fantasy

**The Titan's Curse,** by Rick Riordan, Miramax Books, May 2007 It's Percy Jackson, son of Poseidon, to the rescue again, along with his friends Annabeth and Thalia (the daughters of Athena and Zeus, respectively) when two more demigods are located This rescue mission, however, sets off a series of events involving yet another semi-epic quest, and a deadly curse, as our heroes must foil the ever-more fiendish plans of Kronos and his mysterious new allies Toss in the wild cards of Artemis and her Hunt, and not everyone is coming back alive and intact from the most dangerous adventure Percy's had to date. Once again, in this third book of the series, Riordan does a splendid job of weaving together mythological elements with a modern setting, producing an excellent, always entertaining series full of adventure and sharp characterization Perfect for the Harry Potter crowd

***The Wizard Heir,*** by Cinda Williams Chima, Hyperion, May 2007. After the events of *The Warrior Heir,* the magical society of the Weir—the warring wizard Houses and the lesser guilds—is in a state of flux, their traditional status quo completely upset. Thrown into the midst of chaos is Seph McCauley, whose untrained wizard powers make him an ideal pawn for a ruthless cabal bent on regaining their dominance over the lesser guilds. When Seph finally breaks free of that control, he finds surprising new allies, family he never knew existed and a destiny that he may not live to fulfill Cinda Williams Chima raises the stakes in this urban fantasy, offering a story full of twists and turns and plenty of action.Of special note are her richly developed characters, and the intriguing society that fuels so much of the plot. I'm looking forward to the next in the series.

**Nobody's Princess,** by Esther Friesner, Random House, April 2007. Helen, Princess of Troy, may be beautiful, but she is fiercely determined to forge her own path as an independent, strong woman, regardless of what anyone else says Unfortunately, as a child, barely even a teen, she has to get creative and stay focused on her goals. Secretly, she learns swordplay and defense alongside her brothers, and later studies riding under the legendary huntress Atalanta before finding her way to the Oracle of Delphi, where she discovers what her future might indeed hold In Friesner's brilliant re-imagining of one of mythology's most underrated women, Helen gets a chance to shine as a feisty, creative, strong-willed young woman who'll do whatever it takes to be free, no matter how it defies expectations

**In The Serpent's Coils,** by Tiffany Trent, Mirrorstone, September 2007. After the deaths of her parents in the wake of the Civil War, Corrine Jameson goes to live with her mysterious uncle.However, after a series of strange dreams and mysterious events, Corrine is sent to Falston Manor, a school for troubled girls There, oddities abound, and her dreams go ever weirder, and very soon Corrine is embroiled in an ever-deepening set of problems. A conflict is brewing between the Fey and the witches who run Falston, and girls are steadily disappearing.Caught in the middle, will Corrine figure out which side she belongs on, and discover the truth of things before her efforts cause irreparable harm? The first book in a new series, *In The Serpent's Coils* is a moody, atmospheric story, full of ghosts and dark imagery, magic and mystery, which will keep readers guessing right up until the last page. I'll definitely be looking forward to future installments in this series

**Tantalize,** by Cynthia Leitich-Smith, Candlewick, February 2007. Quincie Morris has a lot on her plate, literally.Helping to finish revamping her family's restaurant as Austin's first vampire-themed restaurant, while juggling schoolwork and a somewhat confusing relationship with her werewolf boyfriend, has stretched her to the limits. Things get stranger after she meets the restaurant's new chef, a man with a great many secrets, to whom Quincie is strangely attracted. But when bodies start turning up, and vampires seem to be involved, can Quincie figure out what's going on before her life is changed forever? In this dark, richly seductive story, one young woman discovers what a fine line exists between predators and prey, and whether she has what it takes to survive. I wish some of the setting had been explored and explained more, but overall, this is a fascinating book, and I hope there's more to come.

**The Good Ghoul's Guide To Getting Even,** by Julie Kenner, Berkley Jam, April 2007 Sixteen is way too young to be turned into a vampire, as Beth Frasier learns to her intense dismay after she runs afoul of some bloodsucking high school jocks However, she refuses to be anyone's minion, and now she's going to exact her revenge on those who've ruined her life. With a little help from her friends, she'll get to the bottom of a vampiric conspiracy that's slowly spreading through town But will it be enough to bring her back from the dead, or will stakes and holy water be mandatory come prom time? Julie Kenner turns in an entertaining, humorous tale of life and death in high school, which promises to be an enjoyable series. This book has a distinctively wry tone that sets it apart from so many other vampire books out there

**Hex Education,** by Emily Gould and Zareen Jaffery, Razorbill, May 2007. Sophie Stone never asked to move to Mythic, Massachusetts. No, that's courtesy of her parents, big-time Hollywood types who needed a change of pace. And now that she's in a town known for its witch-heavy history, Sophie's discovering that things are much weirder than she expected, including the fact that she's actually a witch, part of a coven that's supposed to protect the town from some predestined evil. Can Sophie and her new friends figure out their respective roles in things before anyone gets hurt? Only if they're clever Gould and Jaffery turn in a fast-paced, light-hearted tale full of magic and sly humor. ❧

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By Terri Windling

# Lost and Found: The Orphaned Hero in Myth, Folklore, and Fantasy

We find them everywhere in fantasy fiction: the "orphaned heroes," young men and women whose parents are dead, absent, or unknown, who turn out to be the heirs to the kingdom, the destined pullers of swords from stones, the keys to the riddles, the prophesies' answers, the bearers of powerful magic. Think of J.R.R. Tolkien's Frodo Baggins, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter, Philip Pullman's Lyra Belacqu, Garth Nix's Lirael, and Jane Yolen's White Jenna. Think of the orphaned protagonists at the heart of Diana Wynne Jones's *Chrestomanci* books, Isobelle Carmody's *Obernewtyn Chronicles*, Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori*, and countless others.

Illustration by Kay Nielsen from *Hansel and Gretel and Other Stories by the Brothers Grimm* (1925)

*In fairy tales, abandoned children like Hansel and Gretel are heroic because they outwit those who intend to harm them*

The orphaned hero is not, however, a mere fantasy cliché; it's a mythic archetype, springing from some of the oldest stories of the world. This archetype includes not only those characters who are literally orphaned by the death of their parents, but also children who are lost, abandoned, cast out, disinherited by evil stepparents, raised in supernatural captivity, or reared by wild animals. We can trace the archetype back from the popular fantasy books listed above to the literary orphans of the 19th century (Dickens' Oliver Twist, Mark Twain's Huck Finn, Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, to name just a few), and then further back through famous "foundling" stories such as Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* and William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, to a worldwide body of folk tales and myths about children orphaned and abandoned. Alongside these stories is another deep cache of tales on the "stolen child" theme: children whisked away by fairies, trolls, djinn, gypsies, Baba Yaga ... sometimes reappearing many years later and sometimes never seen again. We discussed changeling and stolen child stories in a previous column (you can read it online at www.endicott-studio.com/jMA0301changelings.html), so we'll leave these tales aside for the moment and focus on the orphan archetype.

One story we find repeated in myths and sacred texts the world over is the birth-story of a great prophet or leader abandoned in infancy. Moses, for example, was born in Egypt at a time when the Pharaoh had commanded all Hebrew males to be drowned in the Nile at birth. When his mother could hide the infant no longer, she made a small boat of bulrushes and sent him sailing off down the river. The baby was found by the Pharaoh's daughter and grew up to become her adopted son, all the while watched over by his original mother, who'd been appointed to be his nurse.

According to Persian legend, Cyrus the Great's grandfather, Astyges, dreamed that his grandson would one day claim his throne and so he ordered the child killed. His steward was unable to murder the baby and gave him to a herdsman instead. The boy was raised as the herdsman's son, but as he grew older his looks and behavior betrayed his noble origins. Astyges recognized the youth, relented, and accepted

# WEIS & HICKMAN JULY 2007

Margaret W[illegible]d Tracy Hickman mine[illegible]

[illegible] of the [illegible] Tales [illegible] Volume II

Ragon Lance

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him—but the merciful steward was punished by being forced to kill and eat his own child Eventually, Cyrus took the throne and founded the Persian Empire

In Greek myth, it had been twice foretold that Paris, the son of Priam and Hecuba, was destined to cause the fall of Troy. Priam instructed his herdsman to give his son a quick and painless death, but the man found himself unable to draw a weapon against a baby Instead, he left the infant exposed on a mountainside where he'd surely die. Nine days later, the herdsman returned and found the babe alive and well, for a mother bear had been suckling him. The herdsman took pity, gave the boy to his wife, and presented a severed dog's tongue to Priam as evidence that the child was dead. When Paris grew up, his abduction of Helen of Troy sparked the Trojan War

Similar birth-stories about legendary women are told, but much less frequently. In one old Assyrian myth, for example, the sea goddess Derceto dalhed with a mortal youth and found herself pregnant by him. Though taking mortal lovers was common, giving birth to a half-mortal child was shameful—and as soon as her daughter Semiramis was born, the sea goddess took her own life. Semiramis was fed and kept alive by doves until a shepherd found her and gave her to his wife to raise. She grew up to become a warrior queen who conquered large swaths of Asia

The most famous story of infants abandoned is the legend of Remus and Romulus In this tale, the good King of Alba Long is overthrown by his wicked brother—who also forces his niece to become a vestal virgin in order to end the true king's line The niece becomes pregnant anyway (by Mars) and gives birth to Remus and Romulus. The false king has the twins exposed on the banks of the Tiber, assuming they'll perish. Instead, the twins are suckled and fed by a she-wolf and a woodpecker; a herdsman finds them, takes them home, and raises the pair as his sons They grow into noble, courageous young men and discover their true heritage, whereupon they overthrow their great-uncle, restore their grandfather to his throne, and then, just for good measure, go on to found the city of Rome

Michael Newton (author of the fascinating book *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children*) delves into the mythic symbolism inherent in the moment when abandoned children are fed and saved by wild animals. "Restorations and substitutions are at the very heart of the Romulus and Remus story," he writes; "brothers take the rightful place of others, foster parents bring up other people's children, the god Mars stands in for a human suitor. Yet the crucial substitution occurs when the she-wolf saves the lost children. In that moment, when the infants' lips close upon the she-wolf's teats, a transgressive mercy removes the harmful influence of a murderous culture The moment is a second birth where death is expected, succor is given, and the children are miraculously born into the order of nature. Nature's mercy admonishes humanity's unnatural cruelty only a miracle of kindness can restore the imbalance created by human iniquity "

In myth, when we're presented with children orphaned or suckled by animals, it's generally a sign that their true parentage is actually a remarkable one and they'll grow up to be great leaders, warriors, seers, magicians, or shamans. As they grow, their beauty, or physical prowess, or magical abilities betray a lineage that cannot be hidden by their humble upbringing. Rarely do we encounter a hero whose origins are truly low, at least one parent must be revealed as noble, supernatural, or divine After a birth trauma and a miraculous survival always comes a span of time symbolically described as "exile in the wilderness," where they hone their skills, test their mettle, and gather their armies, their allies, or their magic before returning (as they always do) to the world that is their birthright

When we turn to folk tales and fairy tales, we also find stories of children orphaned, abandoned, and befriended by wild animals —but the tone and intent of such stories is markedly different from those of myth. Here, we're not concerned with the gods, or with heroes who conquer continents Folk tales were passed through the centuries (until relatively recently) primarily by women storytellers—and despite their fantastical form and their frequent settings in sumptuous palaces, they concern issues of life as it's lived by ordinary men and women Abandoned children in fairy tales—like Hansel and Gretel, or little Tom Thumb—aren't destined for greatness or infamy; they are exactly what they appear to be: the children of cruel or feckless parents Such parents exist, they have always existed, and fairy tales (in the older oral tradition) did not gloss over these dark facts of life Indeed, they confronted them squarely. The heroism of fairy tale orphans lies in their ability to survive and transform their fate, and to outwit those who would do them harm without losing their lives, their souls, or their humanity in the process

A common type of orphan in fairy tales is the young man or woman whose mother has died and whose father promptly absents himself when a heartless new wife appears on the scene Cinderella, or the sister in "The Seven Swans," or the murdered son in "The Juniper Tree" might as well be orphans, so little affect do their fathers have on their stories A parent's death often sets such tales in motion, casting young people out of their homes or bringing evil right to their front door in the shape of a wicked stepmother, scheming uncle, jealous sibling, or lecherous father. Calamity thus has a function in these tales it propels the first hard step onto the road that will lead (after certain tests and trials) to personal and worldly transformation, pushing the hero out of childhood and

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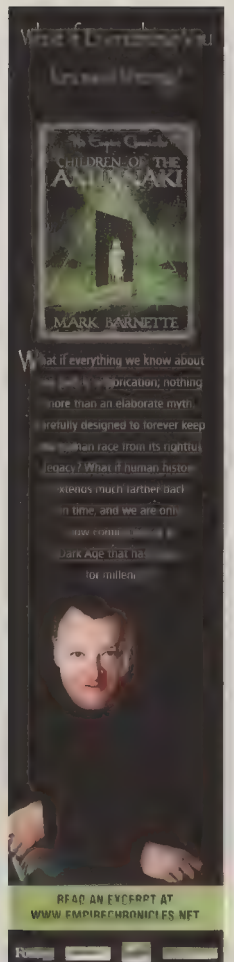


toward a new adult life (the latter often symbolized by marriage at the story's end).

The "evil stepmother" is so common in fairy tales that she has become an iconic figure (to the bane of real stepmothers everywhere) and her history in the fairy tale canon is an interesting one. In some tales, she didn't originally exist. The vain queen of Snow White, for example, was the girl's own mother, threatened by her daughter's beauty and her blossoming sexuality. The stepmother appeared the Grimms' retelling of the tale and carried on to the popular Disney movie, becoming so well known that it now seems like she's always been part of Snow White's story. As Marina Warner explains in her fine book *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, "The Grimm Brothers worked on *Kinder- und Hausmarchen* in draft after draft after the first edition of 1812. Wilhelm in particular infusing the new editions with Christian fervor, emboldening the moral strokes of the plot, meting out penalties to the wicked and rewards to the just, to conform with prevailing Christian and social values. They also softened the harshness—especially in family dramas. They could not make it disappear altogether, but in 'Hansel and Gretel' for example, they added the father's miserable reluctance to an earlier version in which both parents had proposed the abandonment of their children, and turned the mother into a wicked stepmother."

Other tales, like "Cinderella" and "The Juniper Tree," feature wicked stepmothers from their earliest known tellings, although in the case of older versions of Cinderella, the original mother does not entirely disappear. When she dies, she continues to speak to Cinderella (through a magical tree, or bones, or an animal's voice, depending on the version of the story) and it is she, not a Fairy God mother, who helps her daughter triumph against the malicious second wife who has replaced her.

Some scholars who view fairy tales in psychological terms (mostly notably Bruno Bettelheim, author of *The Use of Enchantment*) believe that the "good mother" and "bad stepmother" symbolize two sides of a child's own mother: the part they love and the part they hate. Casting the "bad mother" as a separate figure, they say, allows the child to more safely identify such socially unacceptable feelings. While this may be true, it ignores the fact that fairy tales were not originally stories specially intended for children. And, as Marina Warner points out, this "leeches the history out of fairy tales. Fairy or wonder tales, however farfetched the incidents they include, or fantastic the enchantments they concoct, take on the color of the actual circumstance in which they were or are told. While certain structural elements remain variant versions of the same story often reveal the particular conditions of the society in which it is told and retold in this form. The absent mother can be read as literally that, a feature of the family before our modern era, when death in childbirth was the most common cause of female mortality, and surviving orphans would find themselves brought up by their mother's successor."

*After her mother's death, Cinderella falls victim to her evil stepmother, but is transformed at the end of the story.*

We rarely find stepfathers in fairy tales (wicked or otherwise), but the fathers themselves can be treacherous and in stories like "Donkeyskin," "Allerleirauh," and the horrifying tale of "The Girl with No Arms," the fathers effectively orphan their daughters by forcing them to flee their homes. Such girls usually run to the wilderness, sometimes literally resembling an animal themselves, which brings us to a special category of orphan hero: the feral child.

Stories of feral children hover on the line between legend and fact, and it's sometimes hard to know precisely where the line should be drawn. There have been a number of cases throughout history of young children found living in the wild, a few of which have been documented to greater or lesser degrees. Generally, these seem to be children who have been abandoned or fled abusive homes, presumably at such a young age that they now know no other way of life. Attempts to "civ-

lize" them, teach them language, and curb their animal-like behaviors are rarely entirely successful, which leads to all sorts of questions about what it is that shapes human society as we know it.

One of the most famous of these children was Victor, the Wild Boy of Avignon, discovered on a mountainside in France in the early 19th century. His teacher, Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, wrote an extraordinary account of his six years with the boy—a document that inspired Francoise Truffaut's film *The Wild Child* and Mordecai Gerstein's wonderful novel *The Wild Boy*. In an essay for *Horn Book* magazine, Gerstein wrote, "Itard's reports not only provide the best documentation we have of a feral child, but also one of the most thoughtful, beautifully written, and moving accounts of a teacher-pupil relationship, which has as its object nothing less than learning to be a human being (or at least what Itard, as a man of his time, thought a human being to be) . . . Itard's ambition to have Victor speak ultimately failed, but even if he had succeeded, he could never know Victor better or be more truly, deeply engaged with him than those evenings, early on, when they sat together as Victor loved to, with the boy's face buried in the man's hands. But the more Itard taught Victor, the more civilized he became, the more the distance between them grew."

In India in the 1920s two small girls were discovered living in the wild among a pack of wolves. They were captured (their "wolf mother" shot) and taken into an orphanage run by a missionary, Reverend Joseph Singh. Singh attempted to teach the girls to speak, walk upright, and behave like humans, not as wolves—with limited success. His diaries can be read online (*www.feralchildren.com/en/pager.php?df=singh*), and are fascinating if occasionally horrifying. Several works of fiction were inspired by this story, but the ones I particularly recommend are Jane Yolen's novel *Children of the Wolf* and Karen Russell's story "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" (in her collection of the same title).

More recently, in 1996, an urban "wild child" was discovered living with a pack of dogs on the streets of Moscow. He resisted capture until the police finally separated the boy from his pack. "He had been living on the street for two years," writes Michael Newton. "Yet, as he had spent four years with a human family [before this], he could talk perfectly well. After a brief spell in a Reutov children's shelter, Ivan started school. He appears to be just like any other Moscow child. Yet it is said that, at night, he dreams of dogs."

When we read about such things as adults and parents, the thought of a child with no family but wolves or dogs is a deeply disturbing one ... but when we read from a child's point of view, there is something secretly thrilling about the idea of life lived among an animal pack, about shedding the strictures of civilization and heading into the woods. In this, of course, lies the enduring


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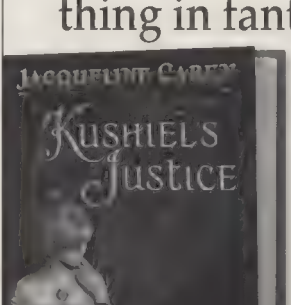


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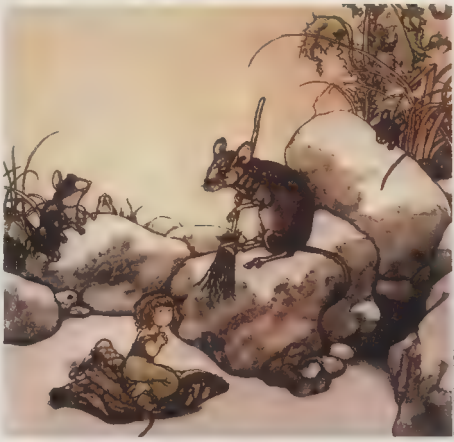

*Hans Christian Andersen's Tommelise, also known as Thumbelina, alone and abandoned in the woods, begs for food from a family of mice.*

appeal of stories like Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* explaining his youthful passion for such tales, Mordecai Gerstein writes, "The heart of my fantasy was leaving the human world for a kind of jungle Eden where all one needed was readily available and that had, in Kipling's version, less hypocrisy, more nobility. I liked best the idea of being protected from potential enemies by powerful animal friends."

And here we begin to approach another aspect of "orphan hero" tales that makes them so alluring to many young readers: the idea that life without one's family might be a better or more exciting one. For children with difficult childhoods, the appeal is obvious; such stories provide escape, a vision of life beyond the confines of a troubled home. But even children from healthy families welcome escape from time to time. In the guise of the orphan hero they can shed their usual roles (the eldest daughter, middle son, the baby of the family, etc.) and enter other realms in which they are solitary actors. Without adults to guide them (or, contrarily, to restrict them), orphan heroes are thrown back, time and time again, on their own resources. They must think, speak, act for themselves. They have no parental safety net below. This can be a frightening prospect, but it is also a liberating one—for although there's no one to catch them if they fall

there's no one to scold them for it either.

For young readers, there is a distinct brand of pleasure in inhabiting the skin of the orphan hero, tasting both the joys and terrors of operating as a fully independent being without the protective cushion (or burden, depending on the child's circumstance) of parents standing between them and the wide, wide world beyond. For adult readers, these tales serve to pull us back into the mind set, memories, and emotions of an earlier stage of life, albeit with adult eyes that allow us to reflect on this stage anew. And who among us does not feel orphaned in this vast, strange world sometimes? Through Harry Potter, Jane Eyre, and Cinderella we experience the orphan within ourselves.

But let's speak now of readers who bring to these tales an experience that is all too germane—for we still have orphans in the world, there are still foundlings left at hospital doors, and some of us have been foster kids, or adopted, or otherwise abandoned by one or both parents. I discussed this subject with a friend of mine who had been a "foundling" child, left on the doorstep of a children's charity almost fifty years ago, a note saying only "Please take him" pinned to a hand-knitted baby blanket.

"I would have loved Harry Potter when I was young," my friend told me. "The orphans I knew were Dickens characters. Oliver Twist. David Copperfield. I didn't want to be a Dickens character. Harry Potter would have suited me much better. But in all the orphan fantasies and myths, you always find out who the parents are ... and lo and behold, they always turn out to be heroes and kings, not the maid pregnant by the stable boy or the poor couple down the lane who have simply had one child too many. Orphan stories satisfied my need to read stories I could identify with, and with endings more satisfactory than mine. But perhaps they also gave me the idea that there's something wrong about my own life story, even though I have made a perfectly good life for myself. There will always be a chapter missing, the one where my identity is finally revealed."

This conversation was in the back of my mind when I recently reread the fairy tale "Rapunzel." I was writing an article about the story (for the last issue of this magazine), and I was focused on "Rapunzel" as a story about a young woman's sexual awakening. (She's impregnated by her prince, after all, despite Mother Gothel's attempt to keep her locked in the tower of childhood.) On this rereading, however, I suddenly found my attention focused on a different part of the tale: the opening. And I realized that there was an aspect to this tale that I'd not fully considered.

In some versions of "Rapunzel," it's the father who trades his unborn child for a bowl of lettuce; in other versions it's the mother herself. They accept this fate, hand over their daughter, and the tale never mentions them again. Some versions of the story soften this


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## At Your Service...


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part and the baby is given reluctantly. In either case, it's a family transaction, the child handed over by their fearsome neighbor to save their own skins. The witch becomes Rapunzel's mother now. (The Grimms' version names her "Mother Gothel," which as a generic name for godmother, a role that can also be viewed as a kind of adoptive mother or foster mother—albeit, in this case, an adoptive mother of the very worst kind.) When Rapunzel gets pregnant and flees from the tower the witch, too, disappears from the tale. Rapunzel comes to her royal marriage as an orphan. We don't know if she even remembers where she was born. She has a new life, a new family, two kids of her own. There is no looking back.

The orphan heroes of fairy tales tend to differ from the orphan heroes of mythology in this significant way. Fairy tales, grounded in the stuff of real life, acknowledge that sometimes the orphan heroes might never learn (or chose not to reveal) their original identities. Papa is not necessarily a king. And some homes are best never returned to.

Despite this clear lesson from fairy tales some years ago I went in search of the birth father I had never known as a child. What happened next? The usual thing. I discovered I wasn't the heir to a throne, a faery changeling, or a child of the gods. Life gives us unsatisfactory endings. That's what a good fantasy novel is for.

**Fiction**

- *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* by Joan Aiken
- *The Chronicles of Prydain* by Lloyd Alexander
- *Wild Child* by T. Coraghessan Boyle (novella in *McSweeny's* #19)
- *The Truth About Celia* by Kevin Brockmeier
- *The Pack* by Elisa Carbone
- *The Obernewtyn Chronicles* by Isobelle Carmody
- *Wild Boy* by Jill Dawson
- *Wise Child* by Monica Furlong
- *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean George
- *Victor* by Mordecai Gerstein
- *The Witch's Boy* by Michael Gruber
- *Tales of the Otori* by Lian Hearn
- *Song of the Dolphin* by Karen Hesse
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- *Troll Fell* by Katherine Langrish
- *Tehanu* by Ursula K. LeGuin
- *Wolf Tower* by Tanith Lee
- *Through Wolf's Eyes* by Jane M. Lindskold
- *An Imaginary Life* by David Malouf
- *The Pirate's Son* by Geraldine McCaughrean
- *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* by Patricia A. McKillip
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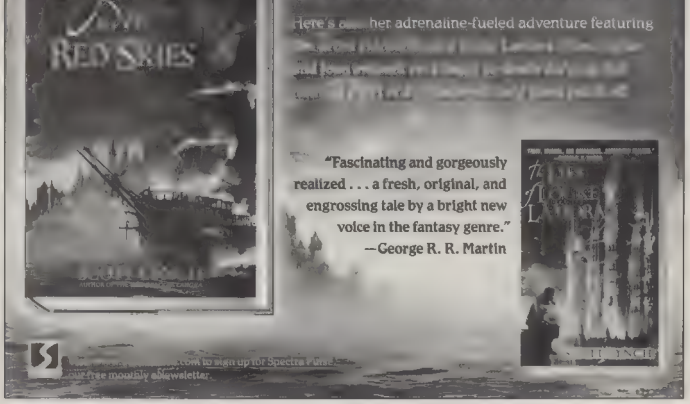
- *Lirael* by Garth Nix
- The "His Dark Materials" Trilogy by Philip Pullman
- The *Harry Potter* Series by J.K. Rowland
- *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* by Karen Russell
- *The Dark Horse* by Marcus Sedgwick
- *The Safe-keeper's Secret* by Sharon Shinn
- *The Ill-Made Mute* by Cecilia Dart-Thorton
- *The Orphan's Tale* by Catherynne M. Valente
- *Knowledge of Angels* by Jill Paton Walsh
- *The Chronicles of Chrestomanci* by Diana Wynne-Jones
- *Sister Light, Sister Dark* by Jane Yolen
- *Children of the Wolf* by Jane Yolen
- *The Wolf Girls* by Jane Yolen and Heidi Elisabet Yolen Stemple
- *The Wolf Pit* by Marly Youmans

**Nonfiction**

- *Nobody's Child* by Kate Adie
- *Savage Girls and Wild Boys* by Michael Newton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# Everyone Bleeds Through

They say that attraction is based on chemistry, pheromones. But can molecules alone account for that sudden burst of recognition that sometimes happens? By Jack Skillingstead

Illustration by Janet Hamlin

A Denny's at two o'clock in the morning I tried to contract my world down to a cup of coffee Stirring in the cream and sugar, focusing on the cup, I was more or less successful at not thinking about Marci back in that hotel room in Seattle. More or less Okay, less. But past experience suggested it would get easier.

Then a girl-voice said, "Hey, fuck you!"

Not to me.

I turned. So did the trucker in a red baseball cap sharing my counter space, and a booth of high school boys

The "Fuck you!" girl was outside, yelling at the tail-lights of a black F-250, the reflectorized Oregon plate flashing when the pickup jolted over a flowerbed on its way out of the parking lot, too fast. The booth kids laughed. Red cap, laconic as hell, turned back to his eggs and *USA Today*

The girl came in, shouldering through the glass door, fumbling a cigarette Black leather bomber jacket, a mini, net stockings with stretchy Swiss cheese tears revealing very white thighs, ankle boots. Pixie hair Too much makeup, and it was streaking around the eyes A safety pin pierced her right eyebrow She noticed me staring and stared back, briefly, something hot and mysterious clicking between us Then she looked away and grabbed a book of matches out of the basket by the cash register

She sat at the counter, leaving one stool between us. Ordered coffee, lit her cigarette, tapped bitten nails

"What's your name?" she said to me.

"John."

She breathed smoke. "I'm Rena."

"Hi."

"I need a ride," Rena said.

"Hmm."

"Over the pass," Rena said.

"I'm not going that way, sorry."

Without another word to me, she swiveled around and said to the trucker: "I need a ride."

He was going that way.

A short time later he got up to use the bathroom. I felt the girl looking at me, so I looked back Her face was too pale, shiny damp, the eyes bright in their rings of smudgy black liner.

"I'm Rena," she said in a dreamy-drugged voice.

"Yep."

"I want you to drive me I don't like that guy Dale or whateverthefuck."

"I'm not going over the pass."

She wavered, and I thought she was about to faint. "Fuck me," she said, slid off the stool and stumbled to the bathroom.

A minute later the trucker reappeared. He looked around then asked me where the girl went. I told him. He paid his check, waited, got cranky, asked was I sure, waited some more. He was forty or so, thick through the shoulders, heavy bellied. Still waiting, he splintered a toothpick digging between his molars.

I said, "She was sick."

Dale or whateverthefuck scowled. "Sick?"

"Yep."

"How sick?"

I pointed a finger down my throat.

"Screw it," Dale said. He glanced in the direction of the ladies' room then quickly rolled his newspaper tight under his arm and stalked out.

I finished my coffee and ordered one to go. The counterman brought it in a white Styrofoam cup with a lid. I paid but lingered at the door. Rena had been in the bathroom a long time. Her flunky looks bothered me. Other things bothered me, too, but I couldn't identify them yet.

There were no other women in the restaurant. So I stepped around to the ladies' room and knocked softly.

"Hey, you all right? Rena?"

There was an odd sound on the other side of the door. Like a machine humming, an electric motor. Something. I pushed the door inward. The volume increased. It wasn't a machine.

"Rena?"

I pushed the door open wider and there was Rena in some kind of meditative posture (lotus?), legs pretzeled, backs of wrists on knees, smudgy eyes open and staring at something not in the room. The electric machine humming sound came from her throat. All of that was weird but okay. What bothered me was that she was hovering about eighteen inches above the gray tile, casting a little off-set shadow.

Eventually I closed my mouth.

Rena's eyes refocused and shifted to me. "I need a ride."

"I know."

She stood up, but not the way I would have done it. Rena sort of flowed to her feet lithe as a fairy, if you know any fairies with ripped stockings and smudged eye shadow—I mean any outside certain red light districts.

She stood inches away, chin pointed at my chest. Her eyes were big and brown and intense.

"John," she said, "you're supposed to take me."

"I know that, too," I replied, and strangely believed it.

We drove north less than a mile and caught the 90 east toward the Cascade Mountains. Freezing rain speckled the windshield and the wipers swept it clear.

"Where exactly are we going?" I asked.

"After my boyfriend."

"The guy in the pickup?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Something has to happen."

"Like what?"

She leaned close to me, her face practically on my shoulder, and she sniffed me. Did it a couple of times then sat back. "You're bleeding through," she said, "but I don't think you know it yet."

"What are you talking about?"

"Try closing your eyes."

I looked at her, then back at the road.

"Close your eyes," she said. "Go ahead. The road's straight, right?"

"Pretty straight."

"So do it. Close them tight for about two seconds. Not like blinking."

Silver rain needled in the tunneling high-beams. My body felt weird, like I was in a vivid dream. I closed my eyes.

And ... saw.

Daylight, a cloud-blown autumnal sky. The road was narrow and muddy. The countryside opened wide, green desaturated to something approaching dun. There was a forest in the distance, rising up into foothills out of which thrust the brutal face of a mountain. And it was more than seeing. I felt cold wind on my face and hands—hands that were gripping a polished wooden handle. Whatever contraption I was sitting on jolted over the muddy road. Rena sat next to me wearing a heavy wool cloak with the hood drawn up. She pulled the hood back and smiled. A white scar intersected her left eyebrow. Something whistled and I felt hot steam on the back of my neck.

I opened my eyes.

The wipers swept the windshield clear. My heart pounded with thrilling intensity. The vision translated to freedom in my blood.

"What was that?"

"Smell me," Rena said.

I swung the car into the breakdown lane, stopped, turned the dome light on, looked at her.

"Smell you," I said.

"Yes." She grinned and pulled her shirt open at the throat. "Come close."

I unbuckled my seatbelt and let it retract, then leaned over, my face close to her exposed neck, my nose practically touching her collarbone. I wanted to touch her with everything I had but kept my hands, awkwardly, hovering away from her leg, her breast.

"What do I smell like?" she asked.

A girl, youth, promise, joy, temptation without consequences. FUN. I said, "It's pine and something else. Cinnamon?"

"Oh, you smell the cinnamon!"

"More like I can taste it. What's it mean, what happened when I closed my eyes? Tell me."

"There are other worlds," Rena said. "A lot of them. All running more or less parallel. Events run parallel, too. Motifs endlessly repeated. Even the people are the same. You and I, here and now, there and then. A thousand theres, and a thousand thens. Ten thousand. All occurring simultaneously. Once in a while your core personality bleeds across from the home place, the center. It happens to everyone eventually. They're the ones who look like they know something nobody else knows. It's kind of complicated. And—what's wrong?"

I said, "For a second I remembered you. I mean really remembered you."

Rena's face turned into a huge smile and a pair of drowning pool eyes. She flung herself at me and kissed my mouth. And I was gone, immortal, no longer contingent. Then she bounced back to her side of the seat and laughed at me.

"Johnny," she said, "I knew you would."

Now picture a woman named Marci Welch back in the Kennedy Hotel, Seattle, Washington. Her hair can be long or short (it's short) her eyes blue or green or brown, it doesn't matter. The main thing to picture about Marci is that she's alone. Maybe she's finishing off that bottle of room service Merlot. Maybe she's in that big bed, occupying a fractional portion of mattress space, drinking the wine and watching Pay-Per-View. Or you could think of her lying there in the dark by herself. Or standing in the shower. Or at the mock Edwardian writing desk concentrating over a note. A woman with twenty-five years of unhappiness named Roger crowding her toward fifty. In fear of her lost powers, her loneliness, her shrinking future. Alone in the Kennedy Hotel where she thought she'd flown from misery at last. Marci the trapeze artist. Flying without a net, leaving Roger behind forever. Flying with the trapeze artist's faith that her companion, the one who was so good in practice, would catch her chalked hands when showtime arrived. So, in or out of the bed, drinking or not drinking the Merlot, in or not in the shower, sitting at the writing desk or not sitting at the writing desk. It doesn't matter. That was maybe the smallest room she had ever been in but with the biggest exit.

Now Rena Parked in the breakdown lane I'd gotten a flash. Not even really a memory More like a sudden pulsation of significant emotion. It started when I smelled her throat. Add the quickening of my blood while we sat there and she explained about simultaneous worlds Then something electric surged through me and ignited an image. That's a lake And sunlight on a white-painted porch Rena in a flowing thing apparently woven out of light Rena herself This is our place. We made it, outside and beyond all other illusions. And the nonverbal operatically proportioned emotional theme? Love As in, I've known you forever and I love you. Wholly and without reserve, all barriers down, the moat drained, guards sent home, portcullis raised and locked open, all my defensive weapons acquired in life (lives?) reforged to plowshares It smells nice here Piney And the flavor of cinnamon tea.

We came up fast on a tractor trailer rig. The Subaru's headlights glinted on the plates, Washington, Idaho, Montana I swung into the opposite lane and accelerated to pass In moments I'd tucked back into the eastbound lane, which climbed and curved until the rig all strung with amber lights was lost behind us

"He's going to be stopped Just a little farther."

"How do you know that?" I asked

"I just do, dear."

A minute later a pickup appeared ahead of us, halted in the breakdown lane.

"Pull in behind him," Rena said. Then, with a puzzled look, "But not too close. I don't know why."

I did that.

F-250, Oregon plate, the left rear end resting on the rim of a shredded tire We sat fifty yards or so behind it, engine idling, rain falling through the headlights. No boyfriend in sight

"Where is he?"

Rena shrugged. "I don't know everything."

She popped the passenger door and climbed out. Seizing a moment of passing lucidity and guilt, I opened my cell phone but got only a faded signal. Maybe if I wandered around a little I could pick it up But I left the phone in the car when I got out to join Rena I felt free And the guilt and fear that had been building around Marci sloughed away and struck me as inconsequential We were all bigger than what we appeared.

My breath steamed in the mountain air. The rain fell icy cold on my head and neck. Rena and I cast long black shadows in the fanned glare of the Subaru's headlamps

A car went by, then another, then it was quiet on the pass. Rena's drippy pixie hair was flattened to her skull. Still cute, though. She closed her eyes tight. A minute or so elapsed.

"Rena?"

"Wait."

I sighed deeply then closed my eyes, too, and another world opened around me. This time it wasn't mountains and grassy vistas. I found myself on a broad promenade encircling midway up a building that might have been a mile tall. Rena was there and we were standing next to an abandoned rickshaw-like contraption with a broken wheel. The sky was painted with sunset clouds.

You couldn't see the rest of the city unless you stepped right up to the retaining wall that enclosed the promenade. We were that high up on the side of this stupendous structure. Not a skyscraper but a sky penetrater. The rest of the city spread out below us, densely packed to the horizon in every direction, blocks and towers and spires and buttresses, plumes of venting steam, checkerboard lights, traffic crawling between the buildings like sluggish yellow blood, a distant rumble and clangor.

I looked away, feeling kind of flickery.

Rena smiled. "You're not doing too well this time. You better open your eyes."

"They are open."

"Here they are. But not back on the road. You're too porous. I doubt you even know what's going on."

"I'm okay," I said, though I did feel unsteady and only half comprehended the situation. If that

"Yes, you're okay. But don't move, huh?"

She walked away. The promenade was wide as a superhighway and empty except for us. Something big came around the curve, lumbering but fast, like Dumbo the flying elephant. It even looked a bit like an elephant, only the trunk was some kind of articulated

I sighed deeply then closed my eyes, too, and another world opened around me. This time it wasn't mountains and grassy vistas.

cable thick as a telephone pole and bent like an inverted question mark. On the fluted end of it sat a little man in a blue helmet, hands manipulating a pair of levers.

I was safe by the wall, but Rena had just stepped into Dumbo's path.

I bolted for her, yelling, and my eyes opened in the first world, the world of mountain darkness and icy rain. Instead of a midget-driven elephant there came roaring out of the dark curve of the pass a tractor trailer rig, white lights like a scream. The driver started to swing toward the breakdown lane, but he still would have hit Rena if I hadn't yanked her out of the way.

Tumbled on the road, my body covering Rena, I saw the boyfriend. He had his cell phone in hand, keypad lit up periwinkle, his face an astonished white mask just before the semi (missing my Subaru by a comfortable margin) plowed him and his Ford into the side of the mountain. I guess he had a faded signal, too, and had gone off to try to unfade it.

Dale or whatever the fuck slumped against the fender of his cab, red hat clutched in his ape's paw, weeping at the mangled pickup and the dead man. Rain fell continuously. Rena and I stood on the other side of the road.

"Was that supposed to happen?" I said.

"I guess so."

She looked like she had invisible sandbags slung over her shoulders.

"When you bleed between worlds," she said, "the trajectories of Fate sharpen. All this makes some kind of bad to-be sense, or it's supposed to."

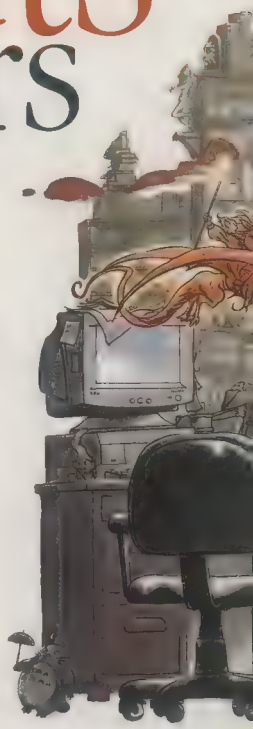
I held her hand and she squeezed hard and pulled me around. "Hey, Johnny—"

I looked at her wet face.

*Continued on page 90*

# Paper cuts Scissors

By Holly Black
Illustration by Charles Vess



## 000—GENERALITIES

When Justin started graduate school in library science, he tried to sit next to the older women that now needed a degree as media specialists to keep the same job they'd done for years. He avoided the hipster girls, fresh from undergrad, wearing black turtlenecks with silver jewelry molded in menacing shapes and planning careers in public libraries. Those girls seemed as dangerous as books that unexpectedly killed their protagonists.

He wasn't used to being around people anymore. He fidgeted with his freshly cut hair and ran shaking fingers over the razor burn on his pale skin. He didn't meet anyone's eyes as he dutifully learned about new user interfaces and how to conduct a reference interview. He wrote papers with pages of citations. He read pile after pile of genre novels to understand what people saw in inspirational romance or forensic mysteries, but he was careful to read the ends before the beginnings. He told himself that he could hold it together.

At night, when all his reading was done and he'd printed all the papers he needed for the next day, he tried not to open Linda's book.

He'd read it so many times that he should know it by heart, but the words kept changing. She was always in danger. She'd nearly got run over by a train and frozen on a long march to Moscow while Justin had sat on his parent's pull-out couch in the den and forgotten to eat. While his hair had grown long and his fingernails jagged. Until his friends had stopped coming over. Until he'd remembered the one thing he could do to get her out.

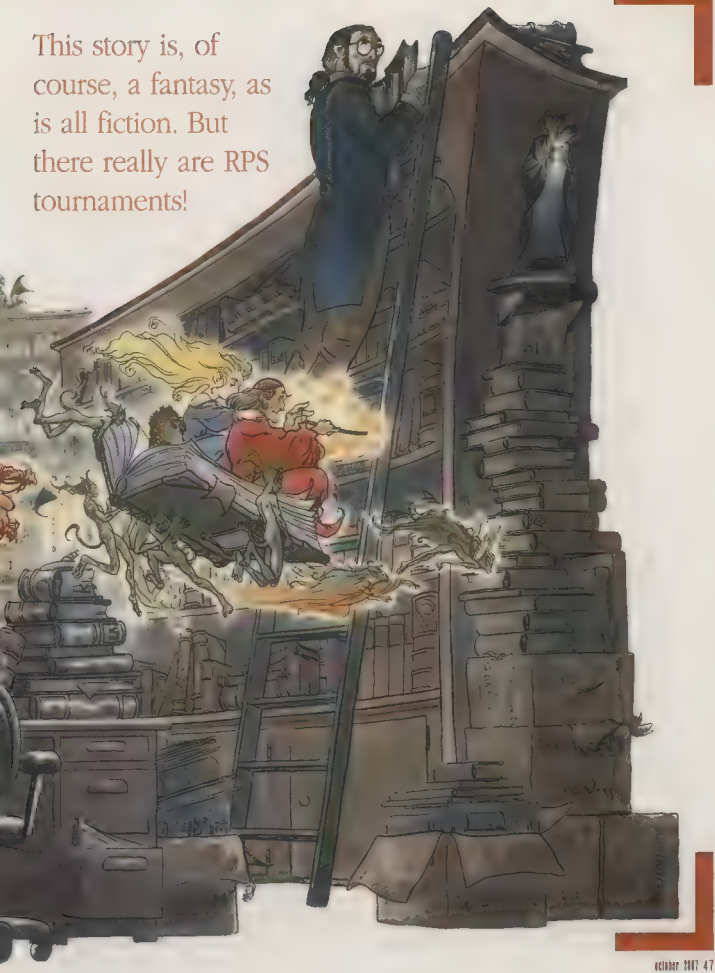
One afternoon, Justin checked the notice board and saw a sign.

*Looking for library student*
*to organize private collection.*
*555-2641. $10/hour.*

His heart sped. Finally. It had to be. He punched the number into his cell phone and a man answered.

"Please," Justin said. He had practiced a convincing speech, but he couldn't remember a word of it. His voice shook. "I need this job. I'm very dedicated, very [illegible]—"

This story is, of course, a fantasy, as is all fiction. But there really are RPS tournaments!



"You're hired," said the man

Relief made him lightheaded He sagged against the painted cinderblock wall of the hallway.

After, in Classification Theory, Sarah Peet turned half around in her chair. Her earrings swung like daggers "Rock, paper, scissors for who buys coffee at the break."

"Coffee?" His voice came out louder than he'd intended

"From the vending machine," she said and made a fist.

One. Two. Three Rock breaks scissors. Justin lost.

"I take it black." said Sarah

## 100—PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

The private collection that Justin was supposed to organize was located in the basement of a large Victorian house outside New Brunswick. He drove there in his beat-up Altima and parked in the driveway He didn't see another car and wondered if Mr. Sandlin—the man he was sure he'd spoken with on the phone—had forgotten that he was coming According to his watch, it was quarter to seven in the evening. He was fifteen minutes early.

When Justin knocked on the door, he was met by a gentleman in a waistcoat. He had a slight paunch and long hair tied back in a ponytail

"Excellent," the man said. "Eager. I'm Sandlin."

"Justin," said Justin. He hoped his palms weren't sweating.

"Each year I hire a new library student—you'll pick up where the last one left off. Dewey decimal. No Library of Congress, got it?"

"I understand perfectly," Justin said.

Sandlin led Justin through a house shrouded in white sheeting, down a dusty staircase to a cavernous basement. Masses of bookshelves formed a maze beneath swaying chandeliers. Justin sucked in his breath

"There's a desk somewhere that way," Sandlin said. "A computer Some books still in boxes I used to run a bookshop, but I found that I wasn't suited for it. I didn't like when people bought things. I like to have all my books with me."

It was a vast, amazing collection. Justin could feel his pulse speed and a smile creep onto his face.

"Best to get started," said Sandlin, turning and walking back up the stairs. "You have to leave before midnight. I have guests."

Justin couldn't imagine that there'd been many visitors entering through the front door, considering how thick the dust was upstairs The wooden planks under his feet, however, were swept clean.

Sandlin stopped at the landing, gesturing grandly as he called down. "It is my belief that books are living things."

That sent a shiver up Justin's spine as he thought of Linda

"And as living things, they need to be protected." Sandlin walked the rest of the way up the stairs

Justin rubbed his arms and bit back what he wanted to say. It was readers that needed to be protected, he thought. Books were something that happened to readers. Readers were the victims of books

He'd considered this a lot at the bookstore, once Linda was gone and before he'd lost the job altogether Grim-faced women would come in, dressed sensibly, pleading for a sequel like they were pleading for a lover's life. Children would sit on the rug and cry inconsolably over picture books where rabbits lost their mothers

The desk when he found it—was ordinary, gray metal rusted at the corners and the PC sitting on top was old enough that it had a floppy drive. The keyboard felt sticky under his fingers. Justin opened his backpack and looked in at Linda's book; when packing the night before, he found that he couldn't bring himself to leave it behind

## 200—RELIGION

Justin had always opened new books with a sense of dread, but no dread could compare with opening Linda's book. Sometimes the *mukhsiya* were arresting a member of her new family, or she was swallowing priceless rubies so that she could smuggle them out of Russia. Occasionally she was in love. Or drinking strong tea out of a samovar. Or dancing.

He remembered her with ink-stained fingers and a messy apartment full of paperbacks. He'd lived there with her when they both worked in the bookstore She was allergic to cats, but she couldn't resist petting the stray that the owner kept and her nose was always red from sneezing. She made spaghetti with olives when she was depressed

He remembered the way they'd curled up together on the futon and read to one another He remembered his laughing confession that he opened new books with a sense of dread akin to jumping off a cliff with a bungee on. He knew he probably wouldn't hit the rocks, but he was never really sure Linda didn't understand. She read fearlessly, without care for how things turned out.

Things, she said, could always be changed.

She told him that she knew how to fold stuff up and put it in books In the books, inside the stones themselves She'd proven it to him. She put a single playing card into a paperback edition of *Robin Hood*. The Ace of Spades Little John had found it. He'd become convinced it was a sign that they would be defeated by the Sheriff of Nottingham and be hanged himself. The Merry Men were less merry after they found his body Justin had looked at other editions of *Robin Hood*, but they were unchanged.

After that, he'd believed her He'd wanted her to alter other books—like fix *Macbeth* so that no one died She said that *Macbeth* was unlucky enough without her tampering

They'd fought a lot in their third year together. Linda had heard that there was a man named Mr Sandlin who could take things out of books as well as putting them in. She wanted them to give up the lease on their apartment and their jobs at the bookstore. She wanted them to enroll in library school. Early one morning, after fighting all night—a fight that had started out about moving and wound up about every hateful thing they'd ever thought about one another— she folded herself up and put herself into a fat Russian novel

"Ohgodohgodohgod," Justin had said. "Please. No Please. Oh God. Please." He'd opened the cover to see an illustration of her in pen and ink, sitting in a group of unsmiling characters

After that, he couldn't tell her that he was sorry or that her bolshie-sympathizing uncle was going to expose her in the next chapter or that she was going to regret leaving him now that she was stuck in an ice storm with only a mink cloak and muff to protect her He was just a reader and readers can't do anything to make the story stop—except close the book.

## 300—SOCIAL SCIENCES

The next time Sandlin opened the door, he was dressed less impressively, in pajamas with blue stripes He greeted Justin with a huge yawn

"Am I early?" Justin asked, although he knew he wasn't

Sandlin shook his head and waved Justin in "Time I got up anyway."

"Right. I'll be downstairs," said Justin as Sandlin dumped out the coffeepot and filled it with water from the tap.

The collection, which had looked so grand at first sight, was, on closer inspection, quite odd. None of the books seemed to be first editions. Many were not even hardcover. Tattered paperbacks nestled up against reprinted hardcover editions of classics with their spines cracked. Some books even appeared to be galleys from publishers, marked, "FOR REVIEW PURPOSES ONLY—NOT FOR RESALE."

Most of the books were easy to classify. They were almost all 800s, mostly 810s or 820s. He glanced at the backs of their covers and the copyright pages and then typed their titles into the database. On the spines of each, he taped a label printed in marker

After he finished a dozen, Justin decided that he should start shelving. He lifted the stack, inhaling book dust, and headed into the aisles.

The problem with everything being in the 800s is that the markers on the ends of the shelves blurred together. Justin took a few turns and then wasn't sure he knew where he was going or where he could find the places for the books in his arms.

"Sandlin?" he called, but although his voice echoed in the vast room, he doubted it was loud enough to carry all the way upstairs.

He turned again. A plastic drink stirrer rested on the floor. Bending to pick it up, he felt panic rise. Where was he? He'd thought he was retracing his steps.

By the time he found his way back to the desk, he felt a faintly ridiculous but almost overwhelming sense of relief.

Sarah leaned back in her seat and sat a roll of twine in front of him.

"I heard you got the Sandlin job," Sarah said. "My friend used to work there, said it was like a maze. This is his Theseus trick."

"That's smart," Justin said, thinking of Theseus picking his way through the Minotaur's lair, unwinding Ariadne's string behind him. Thinking of how his heart had pounded when he was lost in the stacks. It wasn't just smart, it was clever, even classical. He wished he'd thought of it.

It was paper scissors. I swear I can't come up with a good.

No way," Justin said. "I could lose my job."

"My friend said some other stuff—about what happens after midnight. Come on. If you win, I'll tell you everything I know. If I win, I get to come."

"Fine." Justin scowled, but Sarah didn't seem cowed. She raised a brow studded with tiny silver bars.

Rock. Paper. Scissors. Her rock smashed his scissors.

"Best two out of three," Justin said, but he knew he was already defeated.

"Tomorrow night," said Sarah, with a smile that he couldn't interpret. In fact, the more he thought about it, the less he knew about why she'd started talking to him at all.

## 400—LANGUAGE

That night, Justin tucked the string and Linda's book into his backpack and drove to Sandlin's house. He had worked his way through cataloging an entire box of books, when, on impulse, he flipped a thin volume open.

The spine of the book read *Pride and Prejudice* so Justin was surprised to find Indiana Jones in the text. Apparently, he'd been sleeping his way through all the Jane Austen books and had seduced both Kitty and Lydia Bennett. Justin discovered this fact when Eleanor Tilney from *Northanger Abbey* showed up to confront Indy with his illegitimate child.

He looked at the page and read it twice just to be sure.

"To Catherine and Lydia, neither Miss Tilney nor her claims were in any degree interesting. It was next to impossible that Miss Tilney had told the truth, and although it was now some weeks since they had received pleasure from the society of Mr. Jones, they had every confidence in him. As for their mother, she was weathering the blow with a degree of composure which astonished her husband and daughters."

He closed the book, set it back on the shelf, and opened another *Peter Pan*. In it, Sherlock Holmes deduced that Tinkerbell had poisoned Wendy while Watson complained to the mermaids that no one understood his torrid romance with one of the shepherdesses from a poem. Wendy's ghost flitted around quoting lines from *Macbeth*. Peter wasn't in the book at all. He'd left to be a valet to Lord Rochester in a play of which no one had ever heard.

Justin shut *Peter Pan* so quickly that one of the pages cut a thin line into his index finger. He stuck his bleeding finger in his mouth and tasted ink and sweat. It made him feel vaguely nauseous.

## 500—NATURAL SCIENCES & MATHEMATICS

Scrambling over to his backpack, Justin started unrolling the string. It dragged across the floors, through the aisles as he wound his way through the maze of shelves. At first, it was just books, but as he moved deeper into the stacks, he discovered a statue of a black-haired man in a long blue robe and eyes that glittered like they were set with glass, a velvet fainting couch, and a forgotten collection of champagne flutes containing the dregs of a greenish liquid beside a single jet button.

He glanced at the shelves, thinking of Sandlin's pajamas and Sarah's words. "My friend said some other stuff—about what happens after midnight. A party happened here, a party with guests that never disturbed the dust upstairs, that never entered or exited through the front hall."

A party with guests that were already in the house. Guests that were inside the books.

He shuddered then laughed a little at himself. This was what he'd been hoping for, after all. Now he had to just count on the fact that Sandlin wouldn't notice one more book.

That night Justin called out his usual farewell to Mr. Sandlin, before sneaking back down the library stairs. He climbed one of the old ladders along the far wall and cracked open a high, thin window. Then he rolled onto the very top of the bookshelf and flattened himself against the wood. Something banged against the glass.

"Wow. We're pretty high up," said Sarah as she slid inside. Her toe knocked a stack of papers and a bookend shaped like a nymph crashed to the floor. "Shit!"

"Careful," whispered Justin. He knew he sounded prissy as soon as it came out of his mouth, but Sarah didn't seem like a very careful person.

"So," she said. She wore a tattered black coat covered in paint stains and a new hoop gleamed in her eyebrow. The skin around it was puffy and red. "Here we are. This is it."

"What's it?"

"This is where Richard had My friend. Pretty genius, right? He could see everything from up here. And who ever looks up?" She answered her own question with a nod. "Nobody."

"Did he say what happens now?"

"The books come to life." Her voice was filled with awe, like she was about to take a sacrament from the Holy Church of Literature.

Justin looked at his bag where Linda's Russian novel rested. He had a sudden urge to pitch it out the window. "How do you think that happens? There are so many ..." He wasn't sure how to end that sentence. Characters? Settings? Books?

A footfall kept him from finding out.

"Shhhh," said Sarah, completely unnecessarily.

Sandlin appeared, walking down the stairs with a crate. Justin crawled forward to see him begin to set up bottles and a cheese platter. He removed red grapes from their plastic-covered package and set them carefully on one end of the tray, then stepped back to look at his arrangement.

He appeared to be satisfied because when he turned around, he made a motion with his hands and a ripple went through the shelves. The books shuddered and then, one by one, the room began to fill with people.

They climbed out of the stacks, brushing themselves off, sometimes hopping from a high place, sometimes crawling out of what seemed like a very cramped low shelf.

Justin looked over at his backpack in time to see women in high necked dresses and men in uniforms scamper down. He looked for Linda, but from the back, he wasn't sure which one she was. He started to follow but Sarah grabbed his arm.

"What are you doing?" she hissed. "You said to be careful—remember?"

He leaned over the side, scanning all the faces for Linda's. He tried to remember what she looked like, he kept thinking of lines of description instead. Her hair was "thick chestnut curls like the shining mane of a horse" in the book. He was pretty sure he'd read a passage about her eyes being "amber as the pin at her throat" but he remembered them as brown.

Women with powdered cones of hair and black masks on sticks

swept past knights decked out for jousting and comic book heroes in slinky, rubbery suits. A wolf in a top hat and tails conversed with a wizard in a robe of moons and stars as faeries flew over their heads.

He thought he saw Linda near the grapes, whispering behind a fan. He strained to hear what she said, but all he heard were other conversations. Without quite meaning to, he realized what he was hearing.

"Sarah." Justin pointed to a large-shouldered man decked out in lace, with a slim sword at his hip and a small reddish flower in his hands. He was lazily chatting up a skinny, red-headed young woman in jeans and a t-shirt.

"Demmed smart you are," said the man. "Pretty too. I've been assured my taste is unerring so there's no need to protest."

"Sarah," said Justin. "That's the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

"Oh my god," Sarah whispered back, wriggling closer. "I think you're right. Percy Blakeney. I had such a crush on him."

"I think he's hitting on that girl."

"Isn't that?" She paused. "It can't be . . but I think the girl is Anne of Green Gables."

Justin squinted. "I never read it."

"I heard her say something about there being no one like him in Avonlea," said Sarah. "What's she doing in jeans? Anne! Anne! Don't do it!"

Shhh!" Justin said.

"He's married! Marguente will kick your ass!"

Justin tried to put his hand over her mouth. "You can't just—"

Sarah pulled away, but she seemed a little bit embarrassed. "Chill out. She couldn't hear me anyway. And I wasn't the one that almost climbed down there."

He looked back into the crowd, tamping down both rising panic and chaotic glee. Characters shouldn't be able to meet like this, to mix and converse anachronistically and anarchically in the basement of a house in Jersey. It seemed profane, perverse, and yet it was the perversion itself that tempted him to dangerous joy.

"Okay. Jeesh," said Sarah, mistaking the reason for his silence. "I'm sorry I got carried away—hey, who's that in the gold armor? Standing near. Oh." She stopped. "Is that Wolverine talking to a wolverine? In a dress?"

"Which one's wearing the dress?" Justin asked, but the grin slid off his face when he saw Linda move away from the refreshments. She was talking to a man in a doublet.

Sarah put her hand on his arm. "Who are you staring at? You look really weird."

"That's my girlfriend," said Justin.

"A character in a book is your girlfriend?"

"She put herself there. We had an argument—it's not important. I'm just trying to get her out again."

Sarah stared at him, but her expression said: I don't believe you. You did something bad to your girlfriend to make her put herself in a book. Her earrings swung like pendulums, dowsing for guilty secrets. "You knew what was going on when you applied for this job, didn't you?"

"So?" Justin asked. "Oh, you wanted it too, didn't you? I just called first."

"Well, she's out from the book now. You don't look too happy."

Justin scowled and they said little to each other after that. They just rested on their stomachs on the dusty bookshelves and watched the crowd swirl and eddy beneath them, watched Little Lord Fauntleroy piss in a corner and an albino in armor mutter to the black sword in his hands as he headed for one of the more private and shadowed parts of the library.

And Justin watched as Linda flitted among them, laughing with pleasure.

"Oh, you doth teach the torches to burn bright," the man in the doublet told her.

What a line, Justin thought ruefully. I hope she knows he's quoting Shakespeare. Then an unpleasant thought occurred to him. Who was Linda talking to?

"Lo, John Galt hath eaten all the salsa," said another knight in green armor adorned with leaves.

"Oh, how awful," said Dolly Alexandrovna from *Anna Karenina*. She smoothed her gown, looking exactly like a painting of her Justin had seen. "I won't forgive him and I can't forgive him. He persists in doing this every night."

Justin wondered why none of them spoke in Russian or French or whatever, but then it occurred to him that all the books were in translation. The logic made him dizzy.

"Who's John Galt?" growled Wolverine around the cigar in his mouth.

Anne of Green Gables danced a waltz with a man that Justin failed to recognize and wasn't going to ask Sarah about. Stephen Daedalus got into a fistfight with Werther. Hamlet shouted at them to stop, yelling, "It is but foolery," but they didn't stop until Werther got hit hard enough that his nose bled.

Justin thought that after being punched, he looked weirdly like the guy on the cover of the Modern Library reprint edition of *Werther*, where his whole face is wet with tears.

"How can I, how can you, be annihilated?" Werther spat. "We exist. What is annihilation? A mere word, an unmeaning sound that fixes no impression on the mind."

Stephen's knuckles looked bruised. "Whatever," he said.

Linda sank down beside Werther, silky skirts billowing around her, and dabbed at the blood on his face with a handkerchief. What was she doing? It made no sense! She didn't even like Goethe! She'd complained that Werther was a coward and whiny, besides.

Justin started to climb down the bookshelf.

Sandlin shouted something at that moment and then a great gust of wind blew through the library and when it had gone, so had all the party guests.

Gone. Linda was gone. Justin looked out the small window and, sure enough, the sky was beginning to lighten outside. Reaching for his pack, he opened Linda's book and flipped frantically, scanning each page for her name.

Nothing.

Gone.

## 600—TECHNOLOGY (APPLIED SCIENCES)

The next day at the break, Sarah brought a cup of coffee from the machine and set it on the desk in front of him without resorting to rock, paper, or scissors. He still wore the same clothes from the night before and when he looked down at his notebook, all he had written was "faceted classification" with several lines drawn under the words. He had no idea what that meant.

"I should be mad at you," she said, "but you're just too pathetic."

He picked up the coffee and took a sip. He was glad it was warm.

She sat on the edge of his desk. "Okay, so tell me about your girlfriend. What happened?"

"I don't know. We just started fighting. She wanted to meet Sandlin, but I wanted to stay at the bookstore. Then this."

"And by this, you mean that instead of locking herself in the bathroom or throwing a vase at you, she put herself in a book and didn't come out."

"Yeah," Justin said, looking at the desk.

"You might seriously consider that that translates to breaking up with you."

He scrubbed his hand over his face. His skin felt rougher than his stubble. "I don't think she knew how to get out." But, as he thought back on it, he couldn't recall reading that she wanted to; characters in Russian novels are big on bemoaning their personal tragedy. It seemed that wouldn't have been left out.

Sarah shrugged. "You said that she wanted to meet Sandlin. You brought her to him. You're done."

"I never got to say I was sorry."

"Are you?" Sarah took a sip from her cup and made a face.

Justin scowled. "What kind of question is that?"

"Well, you don't even seem to know what you did, or if you did anything."

He looked down at the laces of his sneakers, the dirty knots that he hated untangling so much that he just pulled the things off and on. Now they were hopeless. The knots would never come out. He sighed.

"Do you even like books?" Sarah asked. She waved her hand around. "Was all of this for her?"

"Of course I like books!" Justin said, looking up. He didn't know how to explain. He'd started library school to get Linda to Sandlin, but he actually liked it. It felt good to carefully organize the books so that other people would know what they were getting themselves into. "I've always liked books. I just don't trust them."

"What about people?" Sarah asked.

He looked at her blankly.

"Do you trust people?"

"I guess. I mean, sure. Within reason. I don't think people usually have terrible secrets the way characters do, but people often aren't as amazing either. We're watered down."

"I have a secret," Sarah said. "I compete in rock, paper, scissors tournaments."

He laughed.

"I'm serious," Sarah said.

"Wait a minute. You mean you cheated me out of all that coffee?" For a moment, Justin just looked at her. She seemed different now that he knew she had secrets, even if they were kind of lame ones.

"Hey," she said. "I won fairly!"

"But you're like a pool shark or something. You have strategies."

Sarah shook her head. "Okay, you want my RPS secret? It's about understanding people. Rock's basically a weapon. Like something an ogre might hurl. It's an angry throw. Some people shy away from it because it seems crude, but they'll use it if they're desperate."

"Okay," Justin said.

"Now, scissors. Scissors are shiny and sharp. Still dangerous, but more elegant, like a rapier. Lots of people make their first throw scissors because it seems like the clever throw. The rakish throw. The hipster throw."

"Really?" Justin frowned.

"You threw it the first time. And the second."

He thought back, but he couldn't recall. He wondered which play Sarah usually opened up with. Was it always rock?

"Now, paper. Paper's interesting. Some people consider it a wimpy throw and they use it very infrequently. Others consider it the most subtle throw. Words can, they say, be more dangerous than rocks or scissors."

"Of course, scissors still cut paper," Sarah said.

"Oh," said Justin suddenly, getting up. "They do. You're right." He could cut Linda out like a paper doll.

## 700—THE ARTS

Justin pulled book after book from the shelves, not caring about their spines, not caring about the mess he made, scanning each one for a mention of Linda. They piled up around him and the dust coated his hands, ink smearing his fingers as he ran them down countless pages.

Heavy metal scissors weighed down the pocket of his coat and sometimes his hand would drop inside to touch their cool surface before emptying another shelf.

"What are you doing?" Sandlin asked.

Justin jumped up, hand still in his pocket.

Sandlin was dressed in another waistcoat. A single silver pin held a cravat in place at his neck. He sneezed.

"I'm looking for my girlfriend. She got out of her book but I don't know which book she got into."

"The girl with all the piercings I saw you hiding with last night?"

"No," said Justin, trying not seem as rattled as he felt. If Sandlin knew … No, he couldn't dwell on that. "That's Sarah. Linda's my girlfriend, or she was, and she knew how to put things into books. She put herself in a Russian novel, but last night you took her out and I don't know what book she's in now."

Sandlin ran his hand over his short beard.

"You see," Justin said, his voice rising. "She could be anywhere, in danger. Novels are always putting characters in peril because it's exciting. Characters die."

"Your problem isn't with books, it's with girls," Sandlin said.

"What?" Justin demanded.

"Girls," said Sandlin. "You don't know why they do the things they do. Who does? I'm sure they feel the same about us. Hell, I'm sure they feel the same way about each other."

"But the books," said Justin.

"Fiction. I used to own a bookstore before I inherited a lot of money from my great aunt. The money went to a cat first, but when the cat died, I was loaded. Decided I'd shut my store down, sleep all day and do whatever I wanted. This is it."

"But . . but what about what you said about books being alive? Needing our protection?"

Sandlin waved his hand vaguely. "Look, I love spending time with characters from books. I love the strange friendships that spring up, the romances. I don't want to lose any of them. Did you know that Naruto has become close to Edmond Dantès and a floating skull with glowing red eyes? I couldn't make that up if I tried! But it's still fiction. Even if it's happening in my basement. It's not real."

Justin looked at him in disbelief. "But books feel real. Surely they must seem more real to you than anyone. They can hurt you. They can break your heart."

"It wasn't a book," said Sandlin, "that broke your heart."

## 800—LITERATURE & RHETORIC

Justin went home and slept for the rest of the day and night. When he woke up too early to do much else, he opened a familiar paperback and reread it. Then he went to a café and bought two cups of coffee to bring to class.

"Oh wow," said Sarah. "Double latte with a sprinkle of cinnamon. I think I just drooled on myself."

"You still have to win it," he said. "You made up the rules. Now be made miserable by them."

She made a fist. "You sure you don't want to pick some game you're good at?"

Her earrings swung and glittered. Justin wondered if she wore them to tournaments to distract her opponents. He wondered if it worked.

He wished he could raise an eyebrow, but he tried to give her the look that might accompany one.

"Your funeral," said Sarah.

Rock. Paper. Scissors. Scissors cut paper. Justin won. He gave her the coffee anyway.

"I didn't think you'd throw scissors again," she said. "Since I pointed out that you threw it the first two times."

"Exactly." See, he thought, I don't have a problem figuring out girls.

Just one girl.

And possibly himself.

## 900—GEOGRAPHY & HISTORY

Later that week, Justin attended the midnight party at Sandlin's house. He walked through the front door, disturbing as much dust as he could, before heading down the stairs. He arrived fashionably late. Characters were making toasts.

"Salut!" a group shouted together.

"To absent friends, lost loves, old gods, and the—" started another before Justin walked out of earshot.

*Continued on page 90*

You're going to think you know exactly where this story is going when you start it. But, trust us, no one ever really knows where a story is going to go.

Or almost no one ...

# save me plz

BY DAVID BARR KIRTLEY
ILLUSTRATION BY HYEJEONG PARK

MEG HADN'T HEARD FROM DEVON IN four months, and she realized that she missed him. So on a whim she tossed her sword and scabbard into the trunk of her car and drove over to campus to visit him.

She'd always thought that she and Devon would be one of those couples who really did stay friends afterward. They'd been close for so long, and things hadn't ended that badly. Actually, the whole incident seemed pretty silly to her now. Still, she'd been telling herself that the split had been for the best—with her working full time and him still an undergrad. It was like they were in two different worlds. She'd been busy with work, and he'd always been careless about answering e-mail, and now somehow four months had passed without a word.

She parked in the shadow of his dorm, then retrieved her sword and strapped it to her jeans. She approached his building. A spider, dog-sized and iridescent, rappelled toward her, its thorned limbs plucking the air. She dropped a hand to the hilt of her sword. The spider wisely withdrew, back to its webbed lair amid the eaves.

She had no keycard, so she waited for someone to open the door. She checked her reflection. Eyes large, hips slender, ears a bit tapered at the tips. She looked fine. (Though she'd never be a match for the imaginary elf maid Leena.)

Finally someone exited, an unfamiliar brown-haired girl. Meg caught the door and passed into the lobby. She climbed the stairs and walked down the hall to Devon's door. She knocked.

His roommate Brant answered, looking half asleep or maybe stoned. "Hey, Meg," Brant mumbled—casually, as if he'd just seen her yesterday. "How's the real world?"

"Like college," she said, "but with less Art History. Is Devon here?"

"Devon?" Brant seemed confused. "Oh. You don't know." He hesitated. "He dropped out."

"What?" She was startled.

"Just packed up and left. Weeks ago. He said it didn't matter anymore. He was playing that game all the time." Brant didn't need to say which game. Least of all to her. "He said he found something, huge. In the game. Then he went away."

"Went away where? Is he all right?"

Brant shrugged. "I don't know, Meg. He didn't tell me. You could e-mail him, I guess. Or try to find him online. He's always playing that game." Brant shook his head. "And I mean always."

**Meg strode back to her car. She chucked her** sword in the trunk, slid into the driver's seat, and slammed the door.

Devon was the smartest guy she'd ever met, and the stupidest. How could he drop out with just one year left? Sadly, she wasn't all that surprised.

She'd met him at an off-campus party her junior year. They'd ended up on the same couch. Before long he was on his third beer and telling her, "I didn't even want to go to college. My parents insisted. I had a whole other plan."

She said, "Which was?"

"To be a prince." He gave a grandiose shrug. "I think I'd make a pretty good prince." He noted her skeptical expression, and added, "But not prince of like, England. I'm not greedy. Prince of Monaco would be fine. Wait, is that even a country?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good," he declared, thumping his beer on the end table. "Prince of Monaco. Or if that's taken . . ."

"Liechtenstein," she suggested.

"Liechtenstein, great!" he agreed, pointing. "Or Trinadad and Tobago."

She shook her head. "It's not a monarchy. No princes."

"No princes?" He feigned outrage. "Well, screw them then. Liechtenstein it is."

After that she noticed him everywhere. He seldom went to class or did coursework, so he was always out somewhere—joking with friends in the dining hall, pacing around the pond, or sitting under a tree in the central quad, doodling. His carefree independence was oddly endearing, especially to her who was always so conscientious, though later his indifference to school worried her. She'd ask, "What'll you do after you graduate?"

He'd just shrug and say, "Grades don't matter. Just that you have the degree."

And now he'd dropped out.

Angry, she started her car. She drove back to her apartment.

> "What's real is just an accident. No one designed reality to be compelling."

She e-mailed him repeatedly, but got no response. Mutual friends hadn't heard from him. His mom thought he was still in school. Meg got really worried. Finally, she resorted to something she'd promised herself she'd never do—she drove over to the mall to buy the game.

It was called *Realms of Eldritch*, a groundbreaking multiplayer online game full of quests and wizards and monsters. Some of it was based on real life: People carried magic swords, and many of the enemies were real, such as wolves or goblins or giant spiders. And like in real life there was a gnome who sometimes appeared to give you quests or hints or items. But most of it was pure fantasy: dragons and unicorns and walking trees and demon lords.

And elves. In the game store, Meg eyed the box art. Leena, the golden-haired and impossibly buxom elf-maid, grinned teasingly.

Meg had a complicated relationship with Leena (especially considering that Leena wasn't real). The year before, Meg had been riffing through Devon's notebook and had come across a dozen sketches of Leena. The proportions were off, but each sketch came closer and closer to being a perfect representation. Meg had begun teasing Devon that he was in love with Leena. Meg had also once, foolishly, dressed up as Leena in bed, for Devon's twenty-first birthday. It was just a campy gag, but he'd seemed way too into it. He'd even called her "Leena." She'd never worn the costume again, and he'd never brought it up. He'd been pretty drunk that night, and she'd wondered if he even remembered her looking like someone else.

She bought the game (planning to return it the next day) and started home. A flock of giant bats tailed her, and she kept them in her rearview mirror, ready to slam the brakes and dash for the trunk, but finally they veered off and vanished into the west.

Back at her apartment, she opened the game box and dumped its contents out on her coffee table. Half a dozen CDs, a thick manual, some flyers, a questionnaire. It seemed so innocuous. Hard to believe that this little box could destroy a relationship. She and Devon had been so happy together for almost a year before he got caught up in this game.

She installed it. As progress bars chugged, she thumbed through the manual, which described the rules in mind-numbing detail—races, classes, attributes, combat, inventory, spells. She'd never understood how someone as smart and talented as Devon could waste so much time on this stuff.

Maybe she could have understood if the game at least featured some brilliant story, but Devon spent all his time doing "level runs"—endlessly repeating the same quest over and over in hopes of attaining some marginally more powerful magical item. And even after he'd become as powerful as the game allowed, he still kept playing, exploiting different bugs so he could duplicate superpowered items or make himself invincible. How could someone who read Heidegger for fun so immerse himself in a subculture of people too lazy or daft to type out actual words, who instead of "Someone please help" would type "sum1 plz hlp"?

Meg, on the rare occasions that she permitted herself solitary recreation, preferred Jane Austen novels or independent films. She'd once told Devon, "I'm more interested in things that are real."

He'd been playing the game. Monitor-glow made his head a silhouette. He said, "What's real is just an accident. No one designed reality to be compelling." He gestured to the screen. "But a fantasy world is so designed. It takes the most interesting things that ever existed—like knights in armor and pirates on the high seas—and combines them with the most interesting things that anyone ever dreamed up—fire-breathing dragons and blood-drinking vampires. It's the world as it should be, full of wonder and adventure. To privilege reality simply because it is reality just represents a kind of mental parochialism."

She knew better than to debate him. But she still thought the game was vaguely silly, and she refused to play it, though he often bugged her to join in. He'd say, "It's something we could do together."

And she'd answer, "I just don't want to."

And he'd say, "Give it a try. I do things I don't want to because they're important to you. Sometimes I even end up liking them."

But by then Meg had already spent far too many hours sitting on the couch watching him play the game, or hearing about it over candlelit dinners, and she didn't intend to do anything to justify his spending any more time on it.

It was hard some nights, after they'd made love, to be there knowing that he was just itching to slip from her embrace and go back to the game. To know that a glowing electronic box full of imaginary carnage beckoned him in a way that her company and conversation and even body no longer could.

Finally, she couldn't take it anymore. Though she knew she might lose him, she announced, "Devon. Look. I don't know how else to say this. It's that game or me. I'm not kidding."

He released the controls and swiveled in his chair, looking wounded. After a time, he said, "That's not fair, Meg. I'd never make you give up something you enjoyed."

She stood her ground. "This is something I'm asking you to do. For me."

"You really want me to delete it?"

"Yes," she said. *Oh God, yes.*

He bit his lip, then said, "Fine." He turned and fiddled with the computer, then turned back to her. "There, it's gone. All right?"

"All right," she said, euphoric. And for a few weeks things were great again, like they used to be.

But one night she came over and found him playing it again. She stared. "What are you doing?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "Oh, hi." He noticed her agitation, and explained, "My guild really needed me for this one quest."

"You told me you deleted it."

He turned back to the screen. "Yeah, I had to reinstall the whole thing. Don't worry, I'll delete it again tomorrow."

Meg was furious. "You promised."

"Come on," he said. "I haven't played for three weeks. It's just this one time."

She stomped away. "I told you, Devon. That game or me. Isn't that what I said?"

"Meg, don't leave, okay? Would you just—" Something happened in the game, and he jumped. "Shit! He got me."

She left, slamming the door. Devon called out, "Meg, wait." But he didn't run after her.

She expected him to call and apologize, beg her forgiveness, but he didn't. Days passed, then she sent him a curt e-mail saying that maybe it would be better if they just stayed friends from now on, and—disappointingly—he had agreed.

The game finished installing. Meg hovered the mouse pointer over the start icon. She felt strangely ambivalent. She'd fought so hard against this damn game, and now she was actually going to run it. She also felt an inexplicable dread, as if the game would suck her in the way it had sucked in Devon, and she'd never escape. But that was silly. She was just using it to contact him. She double-clicked.

The game menu loaded. She created a character, choosing all the most basic options—human, female, warrior. The name Meg was taken, so she added a random string of numbers, Meg1274, and logged in. The game displayed a list of servers. Meg did a search for his character, Prince Devonar. He was the only player listed on a server called Citadel of Power. She connected to it.

She typed, "Hi Devon." No response.

She tried again. "Devon? It's me, Meg. Are you there?"

Finally, he answered. "Meg?"

She typed, "Are you OK?"

A long pause. "I found something. In the game. Unbelievable. But now I'm stuck. Need help."

Was this whole situation some elaborate setup to get her to play the game with him? But that was crazy. Not even Devon would drop out of school as part of such a ruse. She typed, "Devon, call me. OK?"

Another pause. "Can't call. Trapped. Plz, Meg, help me. You're the only one who can."

"I can't help," she typed. "I'm only Level 1."

"Not in the game," he typed back. "In real life. Ask the gnome. Plz, Meg. I really need you. Can't stay. Meg, save me plz."

She typed frantically. "Devon, wait. What's going on? Where are you???"

But Prince Devonar was gone.

## Devon had said to ask the gnome. But that wasn't so easy

No one really understood what the gnome was. He seemed to wander through time and space. He was usually benevolent, appearing to those in need and offering hints or assistance or powerful magic. But he was also fickle and enigmatic. He seemed to only appear after you'd given up hope of finding him. He also seemed to prefer locales with corners that he could pop out from and then disappear around.

So Meg parked downtown and wandered the back alleys. She couldn't stop thinking of Devon's final words: "Save me plz." If only the gnome would show himself. Hours passed.

Forget it. She was going home. She crossed the street—

And then the gnome, before her.

Crimson-robed, white-bearded, flesh like dry sand. One eye brown, kindly. The other blue, inscrutable. In a soft and alien voice he observed, "On a quest."

Finally. She wanted to grab him. "Where's Devon? Tell me."

"This is your path." The gnome pointed to the road at her feet, then westward.

Meg nodded. "I'll follow it."

The gnome turned his kindly brown eye upon her. "Have no fear, though obstacles lie in your way. Your victory is assured, foretold by prophecy. When the warrior-maid with love in her heart sets out, sword in her right hand, wand in her left, nothing shall stand before her."

"Wand?" she said.

The gnome reached up his sleeve and drew forth a thin black rod, two feet long. He whispered, "The most dire artifact in all the world, the Wand of Reification." He handed it to her. It chilled her fingers, and was so dark it seemed to have no surface. He said, "Imbued with the power to give form to dreams. It may only be used three times."

Devon had said once that in the game there were items that vanished after you used them. So he never used them. He'd beat quest after quest without them, though they would've aided him considerably. He was always afraid he'd need them later. He'd asked, "What does that say about me?" and she'd said, "You're afraid of commitment?" and he'd laughed. It wasn't so funny now though, clutching this wand, so potent yet so ephemeral. How could she ever use it?

When she looked again, the gnome had vanished.

## Meg retrieved her car and set off the way the gnome had pointed. The road- a double yellow line and two lanes of black asphalt, bordered by sidewalks. She drove. Skyscrapers and then suburbs fell away behind her. She passed clusters of thatched-roof cottages. Men farmed and cows grazed and mill-wheels turned. Sometimes ancient oaks pressed in close to the road. Sometimes she saw castles on distant hills.

The needle on her gas gauge sank, and she hoped to find a station, but there were none. Finally, the engine died. She left her car and set off down the sidewalk.

Twilight came. Then the long line of streetlamps lit up, casting eerie white splotches on the darkened street, creating a tableau somehow dreamlike and unreal. She thought of how Devon and Brant would sometimes smoke pot and then get into long, rambling discourses on the nature of existence. During one such conversation, Devon had said, "Do you know anything about quantum mechanics?"

"Not really," Brant had replied.

So Devon said, "Well, in the everyday world, things exist. If I leave a book on this table, I know for sure that it's there. But when you get down to the subatomic level, things don't exist in the same way. They only exist as probabilities, until directly observed. How do you explain that?"

Brant countered, "How do you explain it?"

Devon smirked. "Like this: Our world isn't real. It's a simulation. An incredibly sophisticated one, but not without limits. It can keep track of every molecule, but not every last subatomic particle. So it estimates, and only starts figuring out where specific particles are when someone goes looking for them."

"That's so weird," Brant had said.

Meg heard a vehicle approaching from behind. Then its headlights lit the street. She glanced back into the glare, then kept walking. The vehicle slowed. It followed, in a way she didn't like. Finally, it pulled even with her. A black SUV, its windows open. Out of the darkness came a rasping, lascivious voice, "Hey, where you going?"

She ignored it, walked.

"Need a ride?" The voice waited. "Hey, I'm talking to you." A long pause. "What, you too good to talk to us?" When Meg didn't answer, the voice hissed, "Bitch," and the driver gunned the engine. The truck sped off.

Meg watched it go, then watched its taillights flare a sudden red challenge, watched it swing around, its headlights sweeping the trees, watched it come on, two coronas of searing white. Cackles rose from its windows. Meg drew her sword and stepped into the street. The car horn shrieked.

She slashed upward, between the lights, and the truck split. Its two

halves swept past on either side. Its right half sped into a tree. Its left half flipped over and rolled thirty yards along the pavement.

Meg followed after. She neared the wreckage. A scraggly vermillion arm reached up through one window, then a face appeared—hairless, dark-eyed, ears like rotting carrots. A goblin. He squirmed free and dropped to the ground. A second goblin crawled from beneath the wreck.

The first drew a long wavy dagger. "Look what you did to my truck!"

But before he could start forward, the second grabbed him and leaned in close. "It's her. The Facilitator."

The first goblin studied her, and his eyes widened. He sheathed his dagger. "So it is." He touched two knuckles to his gnarled red brow. "I apologize, my lady. We owe you much."

The goblins edged around her, then hurried over to the other half of their vehicle. They dragged out two more goblins, who were seriously injured, and departed together.

And then they were gone. But their words stayed with Meg, and perplexed her, and troubled her greatly.

**She had other adventures, vanquished other foes,** and the road led ever on. Finally, she came to the peak of a rocky prominence and looked out over a mile-long crater. The street ran downhill, until it reached the gates of a dark and forbidding fortress. She knew that this must be the Citadel of Power and that Devon must be within. She hiked down to it.

The drawbridge had been lowered. She eased across, sword in her right hand, Wand of Reification in her left. The portcullis was up and the gate lay open. She slipped into the yard.

Empty. She crept sidewavs, keeping the wall at her back. She held her breath, heard nothing.

She peeked into the central yard and saw a grand stone altar. She crept closer. An object lay upon it. A wand.

The Wand of Reification.

She glanced at her left hand, which still held her wand. She'd thought it unique. She already had a Wand of Reification, and hadn't even used it. She shrugged, took the second wand and tucked it in her belt, then moved on.

She searched bedchambers, kitchens, a great hall, a cavernous ballroom, all empty. She entered an ancient armory. Crossbows, shields, pikes—

Wands.

Rack after rack of wands. Hundreds of wands. A thousand? Wands of Reification all, she felt sure. She didn't understand.

She went outside and crossed the yard again. The sky had begun to dim, and now she saw faint light in a tower window. She ran toward it.

Which hall? Which way? She dashed through rooms and under arches and up spiral stairs. Finally she found it—a door, shut, wan light spilling from beneath. She hurled herself against it and burst into the room, sword raised.

A bedchamber. Posters on the walls. Devon's posters, from his old dorm room.

Light from a computer monitor. Someone sat before it. He turned. Devon.

He smiled and said, "Meg. Hey!"

**She ran to him, enfolded him in her arms along** with sword and wand and everything. She said, "Are you all right? I was so worried."

"I'm fine." He squeezed her and chuckled. "Everything's fine." He pulled back, brushed aside a lock of her hair, and kissed her. He was so tall and handsome, tawny-haired and emerald-eyed. He wore a gold medallion over a purple doublet with dagged sleeves. "Come on. You're exhausted." He led her to the bed, and they sat down together. He took her sword and wand and laid them on the nightstand.

She rested her cheek against his shoulder. She stared at the familiar posters (the nearest was an Edmund Leighton print) and whispered, "Aren't you in trouble? I thought you were. Devon, I don't understand what's happening."

"Shhh." He stroked her hair. "Just relax, okay? I'll explain everything."

He said that the real world was just a simulation, like a game. He didn't know who'd made it, but whoever they were they didn't seem to show themselves or ever interfere. Like any game, it had bugs. Many of these involved *Realms of Eldritch*, which was itself a new, fairly sophisticated simulation, and sometimes things got confused, and an item from the game got dumped into the real world. That's how he'd gotten the Wand of Reification, which could be used to alter almost anything. With it he'd set things in motion. He said, "Do you understand so far?"

She nodded, tentatively. It was all so strange.

He said that since the wand could only be used three times, he'd had to go looking for another bug, some way to duplicate the wand. Fortunately, there was one. But it was very specific: If a female warrior set out to rescue a man she loved, and was given the wand by the gnome, the game set a quest tag wrong, and let her acquire the wand again at the Citadel of Power leaving her with two. Devon said, "Ah, speak of the devil." Meg raised her head.

The gnome, his head canted so that his mysterious blue eye watched her, Devon reached for the nightstand, took the wand, and handed it to the gnome.

Meg murmured, "Why are you giving it to him?"

Devon said, "So he can give it to you again."

The gnome stuck the wand in his sleeve, gave a curt nod, and hobbled from the room.

Meg was mystified. "You said this bug creates an extra wand?"

"Yes."

She thought of the armory. "But you have hundreds of wands."

"Over a thousand," Devon said. He took the spare wand from her belt and placed it on the bed. "One for each time you've come here. One thousand two hundred and seventy four wands."

She was stunned. "But... I don't remember."

He told her, somewhat cryptically, "When you restart a quest, you lose all your progress."

Meg stood, pulling from his embrace. "Devon, you lied to me. You said you were trapped here."

He stood too. "I'm sorry. I had to. You had to be on a quest to save me, otherwise it wouldn't work."

She fumed. "I was in danger. I was attacked!"

He held back a smile. "And what happened?"

"I..." She hesitated. "I beat them."

Of course. Meg, you're level 60. You have the most powerful sword in the game. Nothing can harm you. There was never any danger. Didn't you get my prophecy?"

"Your prophecy?"

"That's why I wrote it," he said, "That's why I made the gnome recite it. So you wouldn't be afraid."

She paced to the window and looked out. This was all too much. "So now you've got a thousand wands. Why? What are you planning to do?"

He came and put his arm around her, and said softly, "To remake the world. To make it what it should have been all along—a place of wonder and adventure, without old age or disease. A place where death is only temporary—like in the game."

"You're going to make the game real," she said.

"Yes."

She felt apprehension. "I don't know, Devon. Maybe you shouldn't be messing around with this. I like the world just fine the way it is."

"Meg." His tone was affectionate. "You always say that."

She felt a sudden alarm. "What?"

Again, he suppressed a smile. "It's already begun. Ages ago. You think the world always had goblins and giant spiders and a gnome running around handing out magic items? That's all from the game I made that happen."

She felt adrift. "I... don't remember."

"No one does," he said. "The wand makes things real. Not just physical, but real. Only I know that things used to be different, and now so do you."

*And the goblins,* Meg thought. *They knew.*

Devon kept going. "That's what's so funny, Meg. No matter what I do, no matter what crazy, incongruous reality I create, you always want things to stay exactly the way they are. That's just your personality. But we can't stop now. There's still so much to do. And you'll love it when I'm done, you'll see. You have to trust me."

"I don't know," she said. "I ... need to think about it."

"Of course," Devon replied. "Take all the time you need."

**So she stayed with Devon at the Citadel of Power,** and they ate meals together in the dining hall, and danced together in the grand ballroom, and after that first night they slept together again too, and he was so beautiful and strange. She was still in love with him. She always had been. Even the game knew it. They hiked together around the crater's rim, and he told her of the world as it had been, when there'd been no magic at all, and humans were the only race that could speak, and adventure was something that most people only dreamt of. It sounded dismal, and yet Meg wondered, "Could you reverse the process? Put everything back the way it was?"

Devon was silent a while. "It would take a long time. But yes, I could. Is that what you want?"

"I don't know," she said.

That night, Devon told her, "I want to show you something." He led her to their tower chamber and turned on his computer. Meg was suddenly nervous. The monitor flickered. Icons appeared. Devon said softly, "Look at my background."

It showed two students sitting on a couch at a party. Meg didn't know them. The girl was pear-shaped and frizzy-haired and wore thick glasses, and her nose was too big. The guy wore glasses too, and was gangly, with thin lank hair and blotchy skin. They looked happy together, in a pathetic sort of way. Meg said, "Who are they?"

They ride two white unicorns on a forest path blanketed with fresh snow...

Devon said, "That's the night we met." Meg was horrified. She looked again, and suddenly she did recognize traces of themselves in the features of those strangers on the couch. Devon explained, "I used the wand on us. Nothing drastic. I could do a lot more. I could make us anything we want. But you need to understand, Meg, when you talk about putting things back the way they were, exactly what you're saying."

Meg could accept the way she looked now—merely a pale shadow of Leena. But to think that she might not even be pretty, might be that girl.

"I thought you should know," Devon said, apologetic.

The next day at lunch, Meg asked him, "What is it you want me to do?"

He lowered his utensils. "Start the quest over."

"How?"

He nodded in the direction of the tower. "On my computer. I can show you."

"So that you'll get another wand?" she said.

"Yes."

"And I won't remember any of this?"

"No," he said.

She leaned back in her seat. "How many more times, Devon? My God, how many more wands?"

"As many as it takes," he said, without equivocation. She stood up from the table. She said, "I need to think. Alone." He nodded. She went and paced the castle walls.

Devon wanted his new world more than anything. If she went along, then together they could have immortality and adventure and opulence and wonder. What had the old world offered? Crappy jobs and student loans, illness and death. What kind of a choice was that? She'd been here before, even if she didn't remember, and had sided with Devon one thousand two hundred and seventy-four times. Who was she now, to doubt the wisdom of all her past choices?

He was still sitting there when she returned and said, "Fine. Show me."

He led her to the tower and loaded the game. He selected a character named Meg, who looked exactly like her. The character was Level 60, and carried a Sword of Ultimate Cleaving +100. Devon clicked through a few menus, then stood. "Okay, you have to do it."

Meg sat down at the computer. A box on the screen said, "Citadel of Power—Are you sure you want to start this quest over from the beginning?" The mouse pointer hovered over "Yes."

Devon leaned down next to her. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she whispered.

He kissed her cheek. "I'll see you again soon, okay?"

"Okay," she said, and clicked.

**Meg hadn't heard from Devon in four months,** and she realized that she missed him. So on a whim she tossed her sword and scabbard into the trunk of her car and drove over to campus to visit him.

Ages passed.

**And now Leena the elf-maid is the most beautiful** woman in all the world, and her lover is the most handsome man, Prince Devonar. They journey onward together, battling giants, riding dragons to distant lands, and feasting in the halls of dwarven kings. The prince is incandescent with joy. He was born for this, and Leena enjoys seeing him so happy. She loves him.

They ride two white unicorns down a forest path blanketed with fresh snow, and by some strange twist of magic or fate they come upon something that should not exist.

It lies half-buried in the drifts, but Leena can see that it was once a sort of carriage made from black metal. It has a roof, and its underside is all manner of paping, rusted now. Long ago, someone had sliced it in half. Where its other half may now lie, none can say.

The prince leaps from his mount and circles the strange object. "What foul contraption is this?"

Leena drops to the ground too, and staggers forward. A strange feeling passes over her, and a teardrop streaks her cheek. She can't say why. Soon she is sobbing.

The prince takes her in his arms. "My lady, what's the matter?" He scowls at the object. "It's upset you. Here, it shan't trouble us any longer." He pulls the Wand of Reification from his belt and aims.

"No!" She pushes his arm aside. "Leave it! Please."

He shrugs. "As you wish. But come, let's away. I mislike this place." He mounts his unicorn.

Leena stares at the strange carriage, and for a moment she remembers a world where countless such things raced down endless black roads. A world of soaring glass towers, of medallions that spoke in the voices of friends a thousand leagues distant, and where tales were told with light thrown up on walls the size of giants. Film. she remembers. Independent film. Jane Austen.

But the moment passes, and that fantastic world fades, leaving only the present, leaving only this odd, lingering sensation of being trapped in someone else's dream. She mounts her unicorn, and three words stick in her head, an incantation from a forgotten age. She no longer remembers where she heard the words, only that they now seem to express a feeling that surges up from somewhere deep inside her.

Save me plz.

# roger Lambelin

In fairyland each day is like a year in our world, and love can conquer all. In the real world love sometimes has to take a different path, and it's often unclear just what love has conquered. **By Ruth Nestvold and Jay Lake**
**Illustration by Dave Leri**

Every peasant, burgher, and man-at arms between Botolph's Town and Hy Rugosa can tell you that the Rose Knights who wear red have a reputation for passion. There are so many reds—the most common flesh of roses—and so many knights who wear the different shades that even with their manifold and varied obsessions, they could not all live up to the notoriety of a Black Madonna, she who slew men for the pleasure of the blade-in-flesh.

But among the Red Knights, Roger Lambelin was one whose passions did challenge that legendary queen of blood. His chosen color was a message in itself—intense crimson purple with brownish violet in its depths.

A red that could not be ignored.

Lambelin, the Blood Red Knight, had the great good fortune to live in a time and place when knighthood was more a matter of sport and honor than war, after the Cloud Dragon Wars and before the great struggle between the Sun and Moon which eventually consumed the Rose Knights. His years under arms were a knighthood of tourneys rather than battles

Roger Lambelin lived this chivalrous life to the full, fighting every belted knight who challenged him and loving every woman who beckoned to him. But it was not until his path crossed that of the White Knight Schneewittchen that passion became more than a courtly fancy to him.

It was high summer, sky as blue as a unicorn's eye, and he was on a road among the famous vineyards of Elgau, heading east for the tourney of Feligonde. A hawk circled in the sky above him, crying out hyeeaa, hyeeaa. He watched its graceful flight as his gelding plodded along the track between the rows of vines rising on the terraced hills to either side, burdened with tiny green grapes like thoughts of a sleeping harvest god. The afternoon sun was warm on his face and the hawk dipped low as Roger came around a bend in the road.

There she was, astride a steed as white as the colors she wore. Her horse dipped its muzzle in a stream which raced down the hill toward a distant glimmering river. She patted her mount's neck, then as its head rose at his approach, she brought her shield forward in challenge.

"Declare yourself," she said in a voice cool as the night wind, powerful as a spring storm. That sound set a shock to the muscles of his chest, as if he'd been stabbed with a dagger of ice. She had an accent, a trace of some birth he could not place, that made him want to kneel and beg her to tell him her history.

Instead, he played the role courts and bards had given him, settling his own shield into place while giving her a lover's smile. "I am the Rose Knight known as Roger Lambelin. And you, my lady?"

She shook back hair that was a kaleidoscope of gold and brown and palest wheat. The sun caught on strands of copper and corn and set the white of her surcoat ablaze with afternoon light. Neither the glow of her beauty in the sun of the summer road, nor the chest-splitting shiver of her voice, was his downfall. What bested Roger Lambelin between one heartbeat and the next was the way she sat her horse, the commanding tilt of her square chin, the lilt of authority in her tone, her broken nose in the middle of her otherwise perfect features.

"In these lands, I am known as Schneewittchen," she said. "Many call me Iceberg. In the lands of your birth, they refer to me as Fee des Neiges."

The Blood Red Knight blinked. Was the land of his birth so obvious?

She smiled. "Of course."

Schneewittchen wheeled her white steed around. Roger Lambelin had no choice but to follow.

For the first time in his life, he asked a woman instead of waiting to be asked.

She said no.

She had no need to worship him, she was his equal in arms, as she proved to him at the tourney of Feligonde. Neither won that day: they shared the purse, and they traveled to the next tourney together and the next.

And still she said no.

The Blood Red Knight no longer knew himself, but one thing he did know: what he had thought of as passion before was nothing to this. Schneewittchen's bright hair fluttering in the wind was the banner from her burning soul. The intensity within her had touched him and caught him. Her laughter called him forward into storm, fire, and sunlight. He lived for nothing greater than the sight of her smile beneath her broken nose.

If it had stayed at this, one knight pursuing another from tourney to tourney, testing his strength against hers, begging more from her than a smile and a laugh and a challenge, no song would ever have been sung about them. The bards would have smirked, then passed on to greater things. This was more passion than Roger Lambelin had ever known, but such a tale was not so rare, after all.

But there came a day when she was called where he could not follow. It was then that Roger Lambelin rose above courtly love and fevered passion to a place in the lays of the Lands of the Sun and Moon.

One day three summers after they first met, the two knights were camped below a hill crowned by broken stones. It was an old place, older perhaps than the peopling of these lands by men. In the country of Roger Lambelin's birth, such a hilltop would have been called Fair-Bles't and avoided by most in most times, save by the savage and the despairing.

"There stood a high tower here once," she told him, cutting turf for a fire pit with the least of her knives.

"The stones. We had them in my childhood, too."

She granted him a flash of her smile. "The childhood of the world, my friend."

He worked the saddle of her horse free. "I always wondered who walked among those stones and what it was they watched for."

"Even the wind has enemies." She lined the pit with small rocks, shattered chips long slid from the hilltop. A breeze eddied around the two of them, bearing a scent of heavy spice which caused Roger Lambelin to stop his work and stare around him carefully. Schneewittchen continued, apparently unconcerned. "The morning of the world had its strife and struggle too."

Roger looked around for the source of the smell. There was something familiar about it—grave goods? Her horse whickered, shifting as if some friend were approaching. He patted the mount's neck and looked upward. There were no birds in the air, and the sky had somehow acquired a pale green sheen, like a slick of olive oil in a bowl of water. Staked nearby, his own mount screamed in sudden panic.

"Iceberg ..." he began, when light erupted from the hill in beams like white knives. A door opened in the turf before him as time slowed and the air began to freeze.

Schneewittchen set down her blade and faced the light. "I must go, Roger," she said.

He tried to move to stop her, to follow her, but he was trapped. She stepped into the bright knives and vanished like a woman falling down a well, sucked into the hill. The light flared and guttered, leaving him standing by moonlight, his hand still on her horse's neck.

Moonlight? Where had the day gone?

The horse turned to face him, an odd spark in its eye. He looked around. His own animal was bones and leather on the ground, his gear nothing but rusted junk and piles of rot.

Roger Lambelin spread his fingers in front of his face. His hands looked no older than they had that morning—no, the morning of the day Schneewittchen had been taken from him. There was ice rime on the ground, and the stars above were winter stars. He had been standing in this place, touching her horse, for the span of seasons.

Or years, he thought, looking at his rotted gear.

Her loosened saddle still rested on the horse's back. Roger retightened the girth, whispered calm words of nonsense, and went to gather what gear he could salvage from the ancient rot before he set out to find the only woman who would never have him.

Above him in the other moonlight, the hilltop stones glimmered like the diamond teeth of angels.

Her horse had survived whatever had overtaken him—a spell?—and Roger Lambelin was sure the mount would be his key to find-

ing Schneewittchen again She had never given the great mare a name, not within his hearing, as she preferred to call it with a whistle, so he simply called the animal "Horse" as he loaded up her saddle and such gear as he could salvage from the decayed campsite.

"You know where she went," he told Horse. "You welcomed whoever came out of the hill for her."

Horse's eye still held that odd spark. The animal tossed her head, as if impatient to be away.

"Me, too, friend. But abide a little longer." Roger gathered the unsalvageable gear and piled it among the bones of his old mount. Had he wood, and flame, he would have made a pyre. Instead he stroked the skull a moment, before climbing into her saddle and giving Horse her head.

"What hey, did you two finally come to blows? Many have wondered what became of you."

It was the Blue Knight Hansa, camped by an ancient bridge high over the Fallwater Gorge. He sat before a fire, his arms in array before him, while a coney roasted on a spit. He was thin as always, handsome in a long-faced way, with hair that stuck out like straw, but dark as coal. Though there were pale streaks there which Roger did not recall from their last meeting.

"Greetings, Hansa." He pulled Horse to. "I do not know the rumors Schneewittchen has been taken. I search."

The Blue Knight picked up his long sword and began polishing the blade with a rag. "You have not been seen for four tourney seasons. Lost on the road after the Summerisle Festival, where you and I sparred. You were gone as if you had never even lived at all. And yet here you are, looking no different, riding her horse."

Roger Lambeln remembered that the Blue Knight had for a time sought the hand, or at least the bed, of Schneewittchen. "Ah, friend. The truth is a tale stranger than rumor's imaginings." He slipped from Horse, leaving his weapons sheathed. "And I have come to this bridge seeking a way back to her." This place had always seemed to him to be of an age with the hill-stones, even though it was in some repair.

"Have some meat," the Blue Knight said. "And tell me how you came to be riding her horse, with those fresh cuts on your chin where I struck you fair and hard four years ago at Summerisle."

Later, after the sun had set, the two of them walked out onto the bridge. The Blue Knight still kept his blade to hand, but seemed disinclined to use it. Roger Lambeln would not have bared his chest to accept a stroke, but neither would he have fought.

They both knew this.

"Your story is difficult to credit," the Blue Knight said after a while. They had stopped at the middle of the main span. Roger's fingers trailing on the worn coping of the rail. The bridge was white marble, with a granite-tiled walkway barely wide enough for a mounted man, or two afoot. The marble glowed in the moonlight with a sheen not unlike the hilltop stones.

"From most, I would not believe it," the Blue Knight continued. "But we are both of the Rose, and so honor requires me to accept your words. Besides .." He paused, thoughtful. "No one would be so foolish as to create such an idiotic lie, I think."

"I am certainly a fool," Roger Lambeln said, "but no, not an idiotic one. This place is old."

"Of course."

"No, I mean very old. Consider. We are high in the flanks of the Ivory Mountains. Who would make the effort of spanning a gorge with three arches of marble? Here, where there are no marble quarries, and no cities or great markets to require the services of such a fine road. This bridge was made in another time, by people with wealth and power."

The Blue Knight leaned over, looking down at the water leaping two hundred feet below them, a gleam in the shadowed moonlight. "Many things were made in another time."

"Schneewittchen was taken below the hill, by someone who cut a door open with knives of light. Someone she knew, someone Horse knew. I cannot open a door into a hill, Hansa. But I can watch a bridge crossing."

"Which is what I was set here to do," the Blue Knight admitted. "Watch the crossing for you."

"Even though you thought me dead?"

"That I did. But the prince at Point-of-Sleep put a price on you or your shield at the beginning of this winter season, in response to rumors that your hand was on Schneewittchen's death. He set Rose banners out to certain .. ah .. old places, to wait for you."

Old places. So the prince knew something of under the hill. Why else would he think to order a watch in the old places? That in turn meant that those under the hill, whoever they were in these late days, were aware he would be coming. This gladdened Roger Lambelin's heart, for it meant he had a chance of finding Schneewittchen. "And now that you have caught me at my misdeeds, what will you do for this price?"

"Nothing, now." Hansa smiled. "I am curious to see if this tale of yours bears fruit. If you recount only delusion, I can escort you to Point of Sleep with the spring thaws at no great loss. If your story is true, I stand to see miracles and wonders, and the prince can find his own road under the hill. Which leads me to this question: What, precisely, were you planning to do with this bridge?"

Roger Lambelin shook his head. "I wish I knew, friend."

They camped there by the bridge, settling in for a longer stay. After looking at the stars, watching the moon rise and set, and reviewing recent feast days with the Blue Knight, Roger Lambelin determined that the Oldest Moon, the new moon before winter solstice, was approaching.

"The paths under the hill open in the dark light of the new moon," he told the Blue Knight over a pot of beans and herbs one evening.

The Blue Knight laughed, though not unkindly. "And so you are an expert in the affairs of the oldest ones?"

"No." Roger Lambelin stared into the fire. "But we were all told tales at the nursery bed. I remember some of mine. 'The Dark Prince and the Water Bride.' 'The Tailors Three and the King of Rhee.' 'Lord Folderol Went Courting.'" He laughed, finally echoing the Blue Knight's hard-eyed mirth. "Silly stories, full of wizards and talking dogs and secret heirs to distant thrones. But some of the things my nurse told me felt true." He glanced up from the flames, meeting the gleam of the Blue Knight's eyes. "A certain consistency of detail. The way her voice dropped away."

"And one of those true things is that waiting about in darkness on one of the coldest nights of the year is a good way to see faeries?"

"Ill-stated perhaps, but correct. As far as I can figure it."

Hansa leaned in toward the fire. "What else is true? That you should stamp your feet three times and pull your ears?"

"No, this is not foolishness." Roger refused to be baited. "Some tales are worth heeding. That you should never tell them your true name. Eat no food, sip no drink in their countries. To change your clothing inside out and backwards can help you escape their sight. Their days are longer than our years, yet their years can pass in an eye blink. They are arrogant, and proud, and can be bested through reversal of those qualities."

"Much like certain flesh-and-blood princes of our own time," the Blue Knight muttered with a snort. "I'll be Simon and you can be Semple in case the fairies come calling, and we'll bring our water bottles. We can play at being nursery children a while if it suits you. Then ..."

His voice dropped, hard and dangerous. "I shall take you back to Point-of-Sleep where the prince can decide if you are a murderer or merely lost in the grip of madness."

Roger did not allow his hand to stay where his blade lay aside

within its baldric. "Fair enough. Friend."

"That's friend Simon to you, Goodman Semple."

"Friend Simon."

The Oldest Moon rose late in the evening, toward the midnight hour. The stars glittered high and cold, tiny knives in the hands of the dark spirits that ruled night's domain. The wind blowing down the slopes from the range to their east and north died just as the first dark limb of the moon cleared the horizon.

Though he continued to mock, the Blue Knight had reversed his cloak so that the fur lining was outside, and it opened at the back. Roger had insisted they both bear their swords hilt-downward, slung at the shoulder. He had even switched the boots on his feet, though the Blue Knight had refused that last step.

Now they crouched at the end-posts of the bridge, facing east into the dark of the rising Oldest Moon. Roger leaned against the north post, Hansa against the south, each wrapped in his backward cloak as if they were wayward shadows stopped to rest a while.

"I feel like a fool," muttered the Blue Knight.

"Well, if you are a fool, I am a madman, and no one will take my word for what we have done. If I am right, then your foolishness might save your life. Either way, you meet no harm for this, Hansa. But if they do come . . . we must remember who we are. We must remember."

They settled into a bone-chilled silence, watching frost creep across the shattered pavement of the old road from the well-kept stones of the bridge. Roger imagined a childish vision of a great parade of pale chargers, each supple as moonlight, bright as silver, picking their way across the frozen ground to walk out onto the ancient bridge, each bearing a lord or lady of unbearable beauty and power in a nimbus of pale fire, leaving him by the road bereft as any beggar. Or perhaps they would come capering in a line as the apes of the hot, hot south were said to do, grinning with secret knowledge, clever fingers weaving through spell-patterns ancient and unknowable.

But when they did come for Roger Lambelin and the Blue Knight, the fur folk came cloaked in sleep and the misty breath of cold lungs on a winter night, bearing daggers no more—or less—dangerous than ice.

"Semple, wake up!"

Semple rolled out of his crimson cloak with the slowness of dream, falling from his tiny, filthy sleeping nook to the dirt floor amid protesting hounds.

Hounds? Where had the hounds come from?

Simon, the great idiot, stood over him, waving a ridiculous wooden staff, his blue cap nearly tumbling from his head in his excitement. But Semple knew no Simon, did he?

"I am cold, and need my rest before the next bell rings," Semple protested.

"Something is wrong."

Yes, life itself.

"Wrong, Semple." Simon leaned forward, gathered Semple by the close-woven vines of his tunic. "The Snow Princess is crying, and everyone in the mound is disturbed."

"What business is that of mine," grumbled Semple, sitting up to pull on his walnut-shell boots. But it was his business, said a traitor voice in his head.

"Every tear of hers burns the stone," said Simon, quite serious. "When they fall, one of the servants collapses in quivering terror. The first to fall, the first are . . . melting . . ."

"Melting? Simon, we work in the kitchens. This is none of our affair." Except for the princess.

"Old Trillium is already a puddle in the second root cellar. Baker Thrush hides beneath the kneading tables, refusing to come out even at knifepoint. Her tears will wash us all away."

Semple clapped on his cap of red, with the robin feather sweeping down his back. "And to think I could have slept my way through doom."

Simon grabbed Semple so hard that his teeth chattered. "She cries for you, Semple."

"Idiot. The Snow Princess does not even know me."

Simon slapped the butt of his staff against the floor. For a moment, Semple saw metal, gleaming steel wrapped in leather and silk, overlaid with a vision of cold moonlight and two sleeping statues. The same wrongness he had felt upon waking.

"It has been a year and day," he said in a voice that sprang from within his chest, a voice he would have sworn was not his own, saying words that surprised him. "We must remember. The scales can fall from our eyes like the pods of a summer seed."

Semple's staff was heavier than it should be. He picked it up, sighted along the odd imperfections which had long bedeviled him. There was steel there, too, wrapped in leather and old cotton, a patina of frost on it despite the warmth of the dog-reeking hall.

"There was a bridge," he whispered, in his own voice.

"On a winter's night." Simon sounded awed, and somehow weary at the same time.

Semple explored the thought. It was like pushing through muck to find the air at the top of a clotted pond. "We waited there."

"We still wait there."

They stared at each other. Semple was unsure how to go on. Was it a cold dream? Someplace he had to return to? He carried a sword, a capital offense for a servant such as himself.

There is more under the hill and over than I have ever known, he thought. Semple shivered. "Folk are dying of the Snow Princess's grief. I will come."

"She cries for you." Simon repeated, his voice a whisper, the timber deeper than the first time.

They went down the long tunnels, spiraling deeper into the mound through stonework trees, ancient walls of blocks bigger than one of the folk could shift by might or magic, a space of sliding wooden screens each painted with the death of an Animal King, and on to the Queen's Chamber. The Queen lay there in her winter torpor, her vast flanks quivering as scurrying brownies and tiny fliers picked at parasites and climbed to shift slabs of fat in order to keep her sores from growing. She snored with a bellows-breath that could kill a healthy hound, and the red crusts about her eyes were infested with blue mites that seemed like maggots.

The Royal Hall was beyond, guarded by the Queen's presence and her royal attendants. Semple and Simon walked through, staffs in hand, with a purposeful stride. No guard gave challenge, no hound scented their complex doubts, no one noticed the metal clink as their staffs struck the floor, or felt the chill rising from the patinaed frost. They were unremarked saved by the Queen's sleeping grumbles, echoes of their names.

It was like being called across an open forest by waterfall. "Simply semple I'm on Simon s sleeping simples samples slowly signing searching sanity semple ..." Semple's feet turned toward her, the pull so strong he had to use his staff to push himself away.

As they entered the rough, spit-walled tunnel to the Royal Hall, he heard her say in a distinct voice, "Roger Lambelin."

Simon grabbed his arm as Semple turned to look. In the Queen's Chamber, none of the Queen's attendants seemed to have noticed the skip in her rhythms.

Then they were crowded by flower fairies, thin women with flowing hair in all the colors of the rainbow and long, thin breasts that brushed their knees, nipples distended like overfilled bladders in rugose and glowing shades of each fairy's hair color. "Semple, Semple," they cried. "You have come. Moss Rose has been struck down,

and Her eye wells again with another tear."

It was as if Semple were trapped inside some mummer's play, lines fed to him by a greasy man with no teeth and a large cudgel the words came, will he or nil he. "I am told she cries for me," he said.

You must remember.

The sword was cold in his hands.

"Heal her woes and we will reward you." One by one the flower faines coiled their long breasts in their arms like snakes and offered them up to him, each holding a pair of crudely colored blind eyes seeking his fingers, his lips, even his life.

Roger knew he was in mortal peril, in that moment.

Roger? Who was Roger?

A purple-haired fairy released her breasts in a slither to take his arm and lead him through a narrow arch with folded pillars like a partly opened lily. "I am Wine-Cup," she whispered. Her free hand caressed the wrist that held his sword. "I am for you, Semple, when you have freed her from her pain."

The next chamber was low and rough, like the burrow of a starving dog. Schneewittchen lay there on a bed of dented armor and broken weapons, blood from her many wounds visible in the guttering lamplight as dark lines on her pale flesh and across the rusted steel and water-spotted gold beneath her.

"She weeps," said Wine-Cup, "and in weeping she kills."

Schneewittchen, Semple wondered. The snow witch? The Snow Princess

No, Schneewittchen. That was her name.

Somewhere nearby, improbably, a horse whinnied. Wine-Cup did not seem to hear, though she was coiling her left breast around his sword hand.

"No," Roger said, slapping her away, "you are not for me."

"Semple," Wine-Cup replied. "You are Semple, a hearth-elf of the Upper Halls."

You must remember.

The sword was colder in his hand, as if a wind had come up or snow was falling. Horse's breath whuffled in his hear.

A horse, surely. Who would name a horse Horse?

He slapped at the questing breast, which was moving on its own now as Wine-Cup held his arm with one hand while reaching for his sword-staff with the other. The Snow Princess drew a shuddering breath, her first since he had entered the chamber.

"Why?" Semple asked in Roger's voice.

"The earth draws her down, away from Sun and Moon and the war that shall come between them," said Wine-Cup, her tone serious as a bard. Then she tried to kiss him. He saw a bean between her lips, that in her kiss she would press the food into his mouth, his undoing.

"No!"

In that moment Horse bit his ear, and Roger drew his inverted sword from its baldric. He slashed the breast which was binding him and turned away from Wine-Cup's kiss to bring his weapon around in a wild swing which cut her to a flooding blizzard of purple petals and a spray of sticky yellow sap which settled like mist on Schneewittchen's bleeding body.

"Hansa!" he shouted to the Blue Knight, then reached across the blades and edges and rust and blood for the pale-eyed knight whom he had loved since that first moment in the sunlight when she had challenged him.

There was no way to lift her free without shredding her back on the sharpness of her bed.

The Blue Knight called out something indistinct as a kaleidoscope of colors cascaded through the narrow entrance to the chamber, more petals in a dozen different shades flurrying in sprays of sap and blood. Hansa faced off the fairies, leaving Roger the impossible task of saving the White Knight.

What in the name of the Northern Fire was he going to do? He could hear the Queen's distant voice rising through octaves as her sleeping grumbles gave way to waking panic.

Horse

He closed his eyes, held out his free hand, and whistled as he had heard Schneewittchen do a thousand times.

Horse stepped through the blizzard of color, shining pale as the light of a full moon, to toss her head and knock Roger aside. She then mounted Schneewittchen's rusted metal bed and tilted her great head to slide beneath the White Knight's shoulder, taking no care for the cuts and slashes to her own face.

Schneewittchen rolled and clung to Horse's neck. The mare twisted her body, bringing Schneewittchen up to lie over her back like a wounded woman being carried from the field of honor. With the White Knight safe, Horse stepped back into the colors, disappearing into the world beyond the magic of the Ivory Mountains.

For a moment, Roger Lambelin was torn between following Schneewittchen down the road Horse had opened, and rescuing the Blue Knight, who was in furious combat just outside the cloacal entrance. But there was no choice. She would love him, or she would not. Hansa had followed him into this flowered hell on no more than the strength of rumor and humor for a madman.

Schneewittchen would never love a knight who left his partner to die.

Screaming her name, he charged blade-first into the hallway, winter snow trailing him on a howling breeze from another time and place.

Roger Lambelin found himself in a dark place. It was very cold, and soil dusted his mouth and ears, though he could move. Trapped, but not buried then, thank the wind. He clawed for release, his hands meeting stone. Somewhere there were voices.

"Help!" he screamed. He found a sword at his feet and began hammering on the stone with the hilt. "Please, someone help me!"

The voices came closer, muffled shouts. As Roger screamed himself hoarse, there was a clatter of metal, then the thump of hammers.

Eventually, after an eternity of dark panic, a stone above his head shattered, showering Roger with splinters and light. Someone thrust a torch in, the blade of a pole-axe next to it.

"Who is there?" shouted a voice through the hole, in barely restrained panic.

"I am Roger Lambelin, the Blood Red Knight," he sobbed, slumping against the stone. "I have failed Schneewittchen and I have failed the Blue Knight."

When they brought him out, the work party stepped back in wide-eyed fear.

"That mound's been under soil since before living memory," said an unfamiliar young man on an all-too-familiar white horse.

"... I didn't know," said Roger Lambelin. His memory was a kaleidoscope of bleeding petals and tall mud-men with fists of stone and the sheer, quivering bulk of the Queen rising in rage.

"I am Roger the Next," said the young man. "Son of Schneewittchen and the Blue Knight."

"Son ...?" Roger tried to make sense of that. How many years had passed while he fought, and slept? Horse rolled its eyes and whuffled.

"We have kept a man on each mound and bridge from Botolph's Town to Point-of-Sleep," Roger the Next continued. "Mother always said you would come home to us." He smiled, extended his hand, beckoned Roger through the line of panicked peasants.

"I would very much like to see her," Roger said, stumbling.

"Then I shall take you to her grave."

And so he mounted Horse behind the young man who might have been his son had he made a different choice, and rode to see the history he should have lived, to weep rose petals beside her stone before Horse caught Roger Lambelin up and bore him to the lands beyond the moonset where a place had been made for him. ❧

# When the Train Calls Lonely

BY DEVON MONK

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL LEE

Speaking to the dead can be an unwelcome gift, but sometimes it can bring along some unexpected blessings.

It's Johnny's words I hear every morning, before the Nebraska night has given up to the pale light of day. His voice draws me out from under my wool blanket and across the wood floor worn down to slivers. I quickly pull into my day stockings and trousers—my nightgown's too short now that I've done some growing and spreading—and the cold air snaps welts across my bare skin. Fifteen. A woman. Old enough to be a wife. Old enough to be Johnny's wife. As soon as he comes home.

It's his words that keep me hoping. Hoping for a life better than the one I got dropped into. The McMahons took me in, put me up instead of killing me, like maybe they ought of. They had a big farm, cows and chickens and pigs. The Missus pushed out a baby every spring up until the year I got there. There was a lot of unborn babies that year, too many. If the Missus hadn't been walking the creek grieving, I'd probably still be where my own kin left me, squalling by the tracks.

'Course then maybe I wouldn't have to worry about Johnny. Worry about whether he was coming home in the day or the night. Alive or dying.

A train called out, low and lonely. It would be daylight soon. I pulled on my boots and laced them up.

Talcum didn't do much to cover the color of my skin, not fair enough for most folks' tastes. And my eyes, well, folk looked away from them. I'd taken a hand mirror out to the fields one day and spent time looking at my eyes. Strange color, yellow as river sand with flecks of green. I didn't see the power of them. But when I looked too long at some-

one, they looked away, and soon as I was gone, they'd whisper about who my kin might be and why I'd been left behind.

Johnny had come into town young, his whole family down to just him and his dad. Some folks said they were drifters, but they took on quick with the elder Smiths up the road and stepped right up to keep Mr. and Mrs. Smith's small farm in shape. Johnny's dad was good with fixing fences, and his drinking didn't mostly get in the way. I'd been taught to mind my manners and elders, so I never brought it up. The other McMahon young waved it in the air like a sweaty rag whenever Johnny came to school, and Johnny, he just kept his head up, and pretended he didn't hear them

I never said anything when Johnny walked by because he had my breath, and I couldn't get it back when I looked at him. It'd been years like that, Johnny walking by, growing straighter, taller, stronger, and me standing like a shadow, unbreathing, quiet as water stilled at the sight of him.

The summer I turned thirteen, I spent days practicing how I'd say hello to him. I snuck out behind the barn and held my breath until I nearly passed out Then I made myself say hello Over and over. None of the McMahon young found me at it. None of them had time to, what with the war needing every able-bodied man and boy.

That year, Mr. McMahon took to his bed, and it was all any of us could do to keep up for him. We stayed by his side every hour of the day, so he wouldn't slip too far into the dreaming lands Sometimes in the night, Mr. McMahon would look at me, his cloudy eyes going blue, hard, and clear, and tell me the dreams he saw. I got to thinking that those dreams might be a fine place to be. Got to thinking that maybe that's where all the townfolks' unborn babies might be, staying in the warm and softness of that world, instead of coming over into the hard light of ours.

On a warm June day, when I should have been minding my chores, I stood out beneath the hackberry tree by the road and waited Off far and lonely, I could hear the train calling out. Like a wolf who lost its mate, but didn't know any better than to go on keening, looking for a life long spent. Like a soul coming down the living tracks from the dreaming world

Johnny walked up the road from out of town, his boots kicking up dirt too lazy to lift, a new pitchfork slung across his wide shoulders. I stepped out into the street. My heart rattled my breastbone so hard, my cotton dress trembled. All the rest of me trembled with it. Johnny looked up at me and nodded, and then my breath was gone, caught up in the force of him, like he was hard wind coming down to suck away the sweet summer breezes in me

But I'd practiced—I'd spent days practicing. I bit the inside of my cheek and exhaled.

"Hello," I said.

"Morning," Johnny said, and that word sang in me.

"I suppose I'd like to be your wife," I said. That was beyond manners No girl ever asked a man to betroth, but summer was getting on, and soon winter would fall I didn't know if I'd ever get my breath back to ask him again, to even speak to him, so I'd taken my chance.

Johnny got still. Camped back on one foot and looked at me.

The train called out again and I could hear the engine now, feel it deep under the soles of my feet, moving the world as it came. I thought right then if Johnny said no, I'd find the train and take it out of here, out of this hard-living world to a place of dreams.

"You want a man who doesn't have more than the clothes on his back?" He shook his head, slow. "Not much of a husband, Elisabeth Not enough for a McMahon." He looked off over my shoulder, back at our big two-story house, recently painted white, with the clean picket fence around. The Missus liked showing the neighbors we had enough. Enough and some to spare. But it wasn't like that. We got by from the farm okay, but with Mr. McMahon's sickness, and the two oldest boys, Jacob and Matthew, joining the war, and the next two boys soon to go, things had been falling by the side. Too many things.

"When I'm enough," Johnny said in a way that made me think he'd said those words before, maybe enough that he'd worn them in, nice and comfortable. "I'll come back for you. Then I'll marry you, Elisabeth McMahon, and we'll have children of our own." Johnny walked off, a cool wind following him.

All I could think was I wasn't a McMahon, not really a McMahon, but what nerve I'd had was gone, leaving me still as a lake, staring hungry at a sky that would not give up its rain.

It was that night Mr. McMahon left us. I sat in the rocking chair in his room when he pulled free of his bed, free of his covers and his mortal shell. He stood, wearing his Sunday best, and stretched his arms out like he'd just had a good long sleep. He turned to look at me, blue eyes hard, clear

The train called, far off and lonely, and he looked that way, toward the sound.

"I'll be going now, Elisabeth." His voice was stronger than I ever remember hearing it. "You tell them I'll miss them."

"Don't go. Please." I stood and held a hand out for him. He didn't say he was going to miss me, the orphan daughter who did not carry his blood. The girl who saw the dying as well as the living. "Just settle back under the covers and I'll fetch the Missus She wouldn't like you leaving without saying goodbye."

Mr McMahon smiled and his eyes were no longer hard. "She'll see me yet. For now, I have a road to be walking, and my boys to see." He touched my hand with his fingers, and it was like winter breathing ice across my palm, burning cold.

Then he wasn't standing there talking to me anymore When I looked over to his bed, he wasn't breathing either.

I cried myself into the Missus's room. Those of us left, the McMahon women, spent the next few days quiet, or in tears, cooking and cleaning for the funeral. We kept to ourselves, like five strangers in the same house not knowing what to say to each other. Silence took up the space where Mr. McMahon used to be, and none of us had the strength to chase it out.

Johnny did not come to the funeral. It was the next day I

They stood by my bed wearing their Sunday best, and every one of them had things they wanted me to tell their kin.

found out why. He'd gone off and joined the war.

Seemed like all the men left town over the next few weeks, leaving women and boys and old men behind. The school rooms echoed, and the only voices in the halls, in the churches, were soft and high.

I took to staying home more. Days I worked the farm the way the McMahon men would have, and nights I spent writing letters to Johnny, though I didn't know where to send them.

Johnny's dad took his leaving hard. I went out in the fields to visit him, to bring him rolls, or fresh milk. But he turned those things away, and pulled close to drinking instead.

Each day he drank a little more and worked a little less. So I took to helping him, working the elder Smiths' farm every day after I finished my chores at home. I thought maybe I could give Johnny's dad some strength for living, but soon he just sat and drank and watched me do his work. The work Johnny used to do.

Last I saw Johnny's dad was late one night by my bedside. He had his hat in his hands. He stood there though my door had not opened, solemn, shaking his head, dressed in a Sunday best I'd never seen him wear.

"Tell him I love him, Elisabeth," he said.

I nodded. It was the most he'd ever said to me.

"And I'm proud of him. I've always been proud of him."

"Yes, sir," I said.

The train called loud, heading out, and he looked that way, just like Mr. McMahon had a month earlier. He put his hat on his head, and while I watched, he wasn't there anymore.

They said he'd taken his bottle down to the tracks earlier that night. Passed out. They said the conductor never even saw him.

There wasn't enough of him left for a burial, but we did what we could. The elder Smiths made sure he had a sturdy coffin, likely one of their own they'd been saving. They made sure he had a grave up on the hill too, not down by the creek where it floods every spring.

I stood there after the burial, hurting, for myself, Mr. McMahon, for Johnny. Hurting for Johnny's dad who couldn't believe his son was coming home. I did not know how one heart could hurt so much and still keep on beating.

But the days still came and I found myself mending fences, pitching hay, feeding cattle. I did it for the Smiths who insisted on paying me a small wage. I did it for Johnny's dad who had run out of strength for living. But more, I did it for Johnny, hoping if I did it good enough, he'd come home to me.

After three months, my hands were strong as any man's, and my height was coming on. I forgot what it was like to wear a skirt, and wore my older brother's trousers, hemmed and taken in at the waist. I cut my hair to keep it out of the way of the men's work we all had to do: fixing and running the farm and equipment, slaughtering and packing, delivering goods, budgeting, planting, and paying the bills. Missus kept a tight hand on our meals. She prided herself on always having something left in the ration books each month, enough sugar she could make up dozens of cookies to mail off to Jacob and Matthew, and the two younger boys, Seth and Roy. She always had enough left to give out at gatherings, at funerals.

She even came upon the idea to meet the train on its stop at the depot each day. She'd take a dozen cookies, some apples, or what extra we had to give to the boys leaving for war. All the other McMahon girls helped her at it, and eventually all the women in town pitched in, bringing what they had to the depot, meeting the men on every train that stopped. All the women helped, except me. I didn't think I could look at those men's faces. Look at them and know they might not make it back home.

I never said so to the Missus, but I already saw the men at night. Lots of men, some young, some old, all of them stopping by my room on their way to dying. They came by when the train rumbled through town. They stood by my bed wearing their Sunday best, and every one of them had things they wanted me to tell their kin. I don't know who told them to stop by and talk to me before they moved on to the dream world. I thought maybe it was Mr. McMahon, and thinking that made me feel good, like it was his way of saying he missed me.

I kept paper and pen under my pillow, and took down names, addresses, and the things that needed to be said. I bought stationary, envelopes, and stamps with the money the elder Smiths paid me. I put the letters in the mail each week. On the envelopes I wrote "Yours, Most Sincerely." I felt like I was doing some small good, doing my part to help with the war.

But when Jacob and Matthew showed up in my room, wearing their Sunday best, I did not want to see them. Jacob's red hair was combed back slick, showing blue eyes like his father's, but older than I remembered, and Matthew's hair was so short, I could see the freckles up high on his forehead. They stood by my bed. Jacob smiling in a sad sort of way, Matthew just looking sad.

"Elisabeth," Jacob said.

I shook my head. "No. Jacob, you shouldn't be here."

He nodded like maybe he thought the same thing and looked off toward the train. I couldn't hear it calling, but he could. Both he and Matthew knew it was coming.

"Tell Mama I love her. Tell all the other girls the same. We fought hard, Elisabeth. We made what difference we could, just like Mama told us to."

"Don't say you're going, Jacob. The Missus can't take any more. I can't take any more."

"Tell her what I said. And remember you're my sister, always have been. Strong as steel, just like Mama." He tousled my short hair and his touch was like snow on the wind.

The train called out, and this time I heard it.

Matthew spoke up, his voice quieter that I ever remembered. "Tell Mama the same—I love her, and tell the girls so too. What you're doing is a good thing, Elisabeth. It means a lot to us all. And tell Mama we got her cookies. That helped too." He leaned down and kissed me on the cheek and I froze inside, not from his touch, but from his pulling away. I couldn't feel my hands, couldn't see the paper. I was too numb to say goodbye. Too numb to write down a word they'd said, even long after they'd left.

I didn't get out of bed that morning. Didn't get up that day. That night I tried to fall asleep in sheets tangled from tossing in them all day. I tried not to hear the train coming. But when more men stopped by to tell me their last words, things they wanted said to the people they loved, I did not know how to turn them away.

So I wrote their words down, all but Jacob's and Matthew's. I got up the next day, mended fences, tended livestock. I mailed letters. All but Jacob's and Matthew's.

Weeks passed, each autumn day drinking a little more life out of the land. I wasn't sleeping much, wasn't eating much. Jacob and Matthew's deaths pulled tight stitches through my heart, so much so, I'd find myself leaning on the fence now and again, crying for no reason. A hundred times I'd tried to tell the Missus what they wanted me to say, but one look at her, and my words were gone. I was left frozen, still as a lake. I wasn't steel, I was water, and too weak to do any good for any of us.

It was Sunday and raining when the man came to our door. Dressed in a uniform, his chest splattered with medals, he looked dark and somber as a winter grave. He took off his hat and handed the Missus a letter. The letter that told her what I had not been able to, that Jacob and Matthew weren't ever coming home.

When all the rest of them were crying, I felt dry inside, wrung out and hung on a line. There weren't any tears left in me for Jacob and Matthew. I did my part of cooking and cleaning for the funerals. I did my part to let the silence grow big enough to take their place in the house, just like it'd taken Mr. McMahon's place. I wore black and stood sad by their graves.

But the Missus noticed. Noticed me for the first time in a long while.

She opened my door one night.

"Elisabeth?"

"Yes, Missus?"

"May I come in?" She was like that, her manners pressed fine as church linens, no matter how late the hour.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Truth of it was I didn't want her in my room. The train would be coming soon and I didn't know what it would do to have her there. Would the men still stop by, or would another living soul in the room keep them from saying what they needed to say?

She walked across my room, her house shoes making small noises on the old wood floor. She smelled warm as the bread she'd baked for tomorrow's breakfast, and when she sat at the foot of my bed, the springs squeaked.

"You've been writing letters," she said.

I nodded.

"To people we don't know."

I nodded. The train was coming. I knew it, even though I couldn't hear it yet.

"What is in those letters, Elisabeth McMahon?"

I wanted to tell her I wasn't really a McMahon. I was a girl who'd been thrown out by the train track like yesterday's dinner bones. But she was the one who'd taken me in, treated me as well as I could expect. Better, maybe. I had never lied to her. I didn't think I could start doing so now.

I bit the inside of my cheek, exhaled, and tried to say it all in one breath.

"Soldiers stop by on their way through to dying. They tell me things they want their kin to know. Mostly that they love them and miss them. Sometimes they apologize for things. I write it all down and send the letters. That's all. That's all that's in the letters."

The Missus did not look away from my face. Her own eyes were gray and green, the color of old metal. She did not believe me. I supposed I wouldn't believe me either.

Far off, the train called, so distant, it was more feeling than sound.

When she spoke, her voice was stiff as a school teacher reciting numbers. "What did my boys say to you?"

I felt myself freeze up inside, felt my breath stop, my words fade. I tasted blood from biting down so hard. I filled my lungs enough to exhale. I vowed her to say this. I pushed the words out past the pain in my chest.

"They said they love you, and they love the girls too. Jacob said they fought hard and made what difference they could. Ike you told them to. Matthew said your cookies helped." I didn't know if I should say any more. The Missus's face was as frozen as I'd felt, and I was afraid she'd break if I so much as tapped her. But there was more. More I'd been holding inside.

"Jacob said I was made of steel, like you, but I don't see how that's true. And I know you didn't ask, but Mr. McMahon said he'd miss you, but you'd see him yet. And he had a road to walk and he was going to see his boys."

The train called out, closer. I imagined I could feel the engines, barreling through this world, shaking the living.

She nodded. Her eyes were red, but there didn't seem to be any tears left in her.

"Do you think," her voice caught and she swallowed to catch it up again. "Do you think anyone will be by to talk to you tonight?"

"When the train comes."

"I'd like to sit here. If you don't mind." That's when I realized the Missus hadn't always been a McMahon. Before that, she'd had a maiden name, a different people. People with spirits made of steel. Maybe even people who knew how hard it was to sit alone and wait patiently for the dead to come calling.

She put one hand on the covers, her palm resting on my leg. We sat there, looking out my window toward the train we could hear coming, thinking our own thoughts. When the whistle was loud enough, I pulled out my paper and pen and looked at my door instead. The Missus looked that way too.

Three men came walking in, wearing their Sunday best.

I wrote down their words. One man was from Chicago and wanted to apologize to his father. He said to tell him he was right all along. Another man was from Texas. He gave me the names of all his kin and said to tell them he loved them. The last man said he didn't have any kin. He told me he'd fought bravely, and thrown himself in the way of fire so another man could live. I wrote that down too. I had a box filled with those kinds of letters. Words there wasn't nobody living left to hear, but me.

The train whistled low and lonely and called the men away.

"They're gone," I said to the Missus.

She glanced at the window, then back at my face.

"May I see?"

I handed her the paper, and she read it. She gave it back and patted my leg. "Only once a night?"

I shrugged. "Whenever the train comes through."

"Do you mind if I come sit with you sometimes, some nights?"

"I'd like that." I said. Her asking meant more to me than if she'd come out and said she loved me.

"Good." She stood and walked across my floor. She stopped at the door. "If the boys, if they come, I'd like to know while they're still here."

I nodded. I didn't have the heart to tell her it happened so fast there wouldn't be time for her to hear me, wouldn't be time for her to walk from her room to mine before they were gone.

Yet, every night, going on two full years now, my mother and I sit together and wait for the train to call the dying to us. Sometimes she sleeps in my room, often enough we put a day bed by the window for her. I write down the words the men tell me, and she addresses the envelopes, never hearing them, never seeing them, but believing just the same. There's a strength in that, a steel I wish I had. I know she is waiting for Seth and Roy to come by my bedside. I know she is praying they won't.

I was praying the same, and more. I was praying the next time I saw Johnny, he'd be on that train, in the daylight, maybe sitting side by side with my brothers, and all of them coming home.

Prayers, even the best of them, don't get answered how you'd expect.

That cold Nebraska morning, when I was fifteen, I went out and did my chores like every day. I was thinking about Johnny's voice like I thought about him most constantly. Before the sun had shouldered over the horizon, I was already headed down the hard packed road to the elder Smiths' farm. The frozen mud crunched beneath my boots, and I tucked my chin down closer to my chest to keep my face out of the wind. Even though it was cold enough to see my breath, I was warm inside. Not from doing chores. It seemed the only thing that kept me feeling warm and living anymore was thinking about Johnny. I was remembering how he walked, easy, with a slow swing to his shoulders. I was remembering how he looked at me, his gaze steady, the hope of a smile on his mouth. I imagined he looked at me like something behind glass he was saving up for. Like something he desired.

Before I even reached the Smiths' front gate, I heard the thump

of an axe hitting wood. It was a comforting morning sound. One thump, followed by the crack of wood splitting, falling. A pause, while another piece of wood was put up on the block, then one thump, followed by the crack of wood falling.

I shook my head. I couldn't believe Mr Smith had got up so early. Even though he didn't like a girl chopping wood for him, his heart wasn't what it used to be. More than a couple swings of the axe left him winded. Mrs. Smith was still handy with the hatchet, but she didn't chop much more than kindling anymore.

I pushed the gate open and made my way to the woodshed behind the house, intending to take over the chopping for a while. The watery light of dawn played across the yard, veiling lavender across the worn grass, split-rail fence, woodshed, and making a ghost of the figure who stood at the chopping block. Even at a distance I knew it was not Mr. Smith. It was Johnny.

Two years had made changes in him. He seemed taller, thicker muscled, but thinner too, so that when he turned sideways, there wasn't as much of him as there used to be. He had on his undershirt, his arms bare. His collared shirt and jacket were folded over the fence rail behind him. He didn't look up, likely didn't see me as I stood there, unbreathing, quiet as water stilled at the sight of him. I wondered if I was seeing him alive or dead.

He took three steps to the shed, picked up a piece of wood, took it to the block, set it. He heaved back on the axe, bringing it over his shoulder and driving his weight from the hip to split the wood clean in two.

Johnny had always been strong. He was powerful now. And there was more than strength in his movements. There was anger. Pain.

Three steps, another piece of wood, and anger and pain drove the axe down, shattered the wood into two.

If he'd been on his knees praying, I couldn't have seen the sorrow in his soul better. I was ashamed for seeing him so, and knew I didn't have any right to stand there staring at him, at things he may not want me to see. I turned, quiet as I could, and took a step away.

"Elisabeth."

My heart beat at my breastbone and I trembled. But it had been two years since his words could stop me from speaking. Two hard years.

I pulled my shoulders back and tipped my chin up. I turned to him and nodded.

"Welcome home, Johnny."

He camped back on one foot, the axe laying lazy across his wide shoulders. But the wind did not carry the warmth of summer. When it stirred, it was cold as death. He tipped his head a bit. "Come closer."

Maybe a smart girl would have paused. Maybe a smart girl would have looked at the axe across his shoulder, the power in his body, and made her good byes. Not me. I walked over to him, strong in my own way, in all I had been and all I had done since he'd left. Strong in what I'd become. He'd seen battles over the blue seas, and I'd seen them too, in the face of every dying man who came to my bed each night.

I stopped in front of him, so close I could feel the heat rising from his sweat. His familiar gaze made my knees weak and my mouth hungry.

I wished I'd run the comb better through my short hair. Wished I'd worn a skirt today, and realized I didn't own any that weren't black.

He wanted for me to say something, but I didn't have words for him. There was hurt in his eyes, and a distance I could not cross.

"You cut your hair," he said.

I nodded. "So did you.

That got the ghost of a smile on his lips.

"And the trousers?"

I looked away, feeling the blush heat my cheeks. Not much makings for a wife, me in a man's clothes, doing men's work. I looked back at him, and shrugged.

"Jacob's mostly. No time for frills when there's so much work to be done. I do my own at home, and help out the elder Smiths when I can. Mending fences and such."

That put the thick pain back in his eyes, and something went out of him. He looked down at his boots.

"My dad?" His voice almost wasn't enough to hear in the waking world.

I'd thought he knew his dad was dead, and maybe he did. But maybe he needed a living person to tell him so. I'd written a lot of letters, telling a lot of people I didn't know the last things their loved one had wanted said. It was harder to say it to Johnny, and I wished I could use a pen and paper instead of my own faltering voice.

"Your dad said he loves you." I said it quietly, hoping he'd believe. "He said to tell you he's proud of you. That he's always been proud of you."

Johnny did not look up. "He told you so? When I left? Before then?"

"He told me so." I didn't tell him about his father standing at my bedside, didn't think he'd believe me if the words had come from his father's ghost.

The train whistled, far off. Johnny looked up, looked toward the train, like his father had. Like my father had. Like all the dying had. A shiver of fear ran down my arms. I held my breath and wondered if maybe he would make the same choice. To go to the dying world. My heart pulled tight with pain. I didn't want to do this, didn't want to lose him too.

"Please, Johnny," I whispered. "Don't go."

The train called louder, powering toward the depot. I felt the thrum of its engines like a pressure deep in my ears, building stronger until it filled my head, my chest. Johnny was so still. I wondered if he was a dream, my dream, standing straight and strong in the pale gold light of dawn. He closed his eyes. The train called out, lonely. Close now. Nearly here.

Johnny took a deep breath. He opened his eyes and turned his face away from the sound, away from the train. "I don't want to be anywhere but here, Elisabeth. Don't want to be anywhere but home."

I didn't think I had ever heard such sweet words.

He pulled the axe down off his shoulder and set it by his feet. When he held his hand out to me, I took it with my own. We held on tight until the train whistled its leaving sorrow. We held on tight until the engine thundered away. We held on tight. ❧

The train called louder, powering toward the depot. I felt the thrum of its engines like a pressure deep in my ears ...

# HONEST man

BY NAOMI KRITZER
ILLUSTRATION BY JOE KOVACH

**They say you can't cheat an honest man, but you can always keep trying.**

Fiddle Game
November 15th, 1943
Washington, D.C.

A cold rain was falling when Iris came out of the Department of Justice building onto Constitution Avenue. Worse, she'd stayed late filing and had missed not only her usual bus but the next bus as well. There was a diner across the street from her bus stop; she could see an OPEN sign and the tempting glow of light. She started to count the money in her purse, but her hesitation was blown away by a gust of wind and a fresh sheet of rain. She dashed across the street and into the diner, coming in out of breath, lipstick smeared and hat askew, the bell over the door clanging as she wiped her feet on the mat and looked around for a place to sit.

The diner smelled of fried eggs, clean floors, and slightly scorched coffee. It was nearly empty; a man in a suit sat up on a stool at the counter, a man in a long, well-worn raincoat sat in a booth near the door, looking out at the rain. Iris took a seat at the counter. "I'll just have a cup of coffee, please," she said to the waitress. I have perfectly good food at home; I can go home and make some supper for myself. But the rain was falling even harder, so she looked over the menu, sighed, and said, "Oh, just the grilled cheese and a cup of tomato soup, please."

The man in the suit caught her eye while she was waiting. "Nice weather, huh?" he said. "Do you work for Mr. Hoover?"

Yes, sir, I do," she said. "Typing and filing."

"Good for you. I'm just passing through town, myself. I'm an art dealer, when we're not at war."

"I don't expect there's much call for that, during wartime."

"Oh, you'd be surprised. You'd be surprised. But I wanted to contribute more directly to the war effort, so right now I buy and sell surplus—getting scrap from scrap drives delivered to places where it's needed, that sort of thing. Art is just a sideline for now." He glanced up to smile at the waitress as she refilled his coffee. "My name's Leo." He handed her a business card: it said Leonard Franklin. "Leo like the lion. Franklin like the first name of the President of the United States of America."

DINER

"My name is Iris Ins Kirkwood."

"Iris! You're serious? I have a sister named Iris, can you believe it?"

The waitress arrived with Ins's coffee, steaming hot. "I've always just been thankful my mother didn't name me Petunia," Ins said with a game smile.

"I think it's a beautiful name." He gave her a smile warm enough that Ins started to wonder if she should mention her boyfriend serving in the infantry, but he made no further overtures and she decided he was just being friendly. The waitress came out of the kitchen with Iris's sandwich and soup, then continued to the table up front to give the man his check.

Ins's supper, at least, was really good. The bread was fresh, the cheese tart, the tomato soup creamy. Or maybe it was just the lingering chill and the rain outside that made everything taste so good. Ins glanced up at the art-dealer-turned-scrap-dealer, and since he was looking away from her, dunked a piece of her sandwich in the soup. She was never certain whether you were allowed to do that sort of thing in restaurants.

"Excuse me ." The man from the front of the restaurant was talking to the waitress, his face obviously distressed. "I am so, so sorry, ma'am, but I just realized that I left my wallet back at my room. I'm going to have to go get it before I can pay, but I don't want you to think I'm running out on my bill. I can leave my instrument here as security ..." He had a violin case, Iris saw; he opened it up to show the waitress the violin inside. "This is a good violin. I paid fifty dollars for it, a few years back, but I think it's worth more."

The waitress glanced at it and grunted. "It looks like it's worth more than your meal, anyway. Go ahead and get your wallet."

"I'll be right back," he promised, and went back out into the rain.

Iris was finishing her sandwich when she heard Leo say, "Can I take a look at that?"

"What, the violin?" The waitress shrugged. "I don't see why not."

Leo opened the case and took out the instrument, turning it over in his hands and holding it up to the light. She heard him let out a long, appreciative breath, and looked up to see him swallow hard. For a moment, his eyes darted around the room, like a man with a poker hand that he knows will win the night. Then he looked back up at Iris, and at the waitress. "My God," he said. "This is a Stradivarius."

"Strada what?"

"One of the rarest and most valuable violins ever constructed. Most are in the hands of collectors, museums ... It's worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Maybe more." At the waitress's skeptical look, he gave Iris another warm smile. "I was just telling Miss Kirkwood here that I was an art dealer, before the war; these days I mostly deal scrap, but I do make an exception when fate

"They say you can't cheat an honest man. That's not true. It's easy to cheat an honest man, if he assumes that others are as honest as he is."

throws the truly exceptional piece my way. I would happily pay two hundred thousand dollars for this violin. Cash. I'm quite sure that when the war is over I'll be able to resell this instrument for many times that."

"Oh, won't that man be happy," Ins said. "You could tell he didn't have much money."

"Where did he say he was going?" Leo asked the waitress.

"Back to his room. He didn't say where it was, but it can't be that far."

Minutes ticked past. Leo reverently set the violin back into its case, then checked his wristwatch. "Oh dear," he said. "My train ... well, another couple of minutes won't hurt."

They waited. Iris finished her coffee; the waitress, watching the door, left her cup empty. Another sheet of rain came down outside. Ins looked at the clock on the wall, she had just missed the next bus, but this was exciting enough that she didn't care.

"I really can't wait any longer," Leo said, finally. He gave the waitress his business card. "When the man comes back, and surely he's planning on coming back, give him my card and tell him to call me, collect, tomorrow morning at my office in New York City. I will be pleased to offer him two hundred thousand dollars for his violin, and in the meantime I do urge him to take very good care of it." He put on his hat and raincoat. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Kirkwood," he said, and went out in a jingle of bells and a blast of damp wind.

"Well," the waitress said in amazement, and looked down at the violin on the counter. Suddenly realizing that it might be vulnerable to a spill, she moved it over to an empty table and then refilled Ins's coffee cup. "Dessert for you today, ma'am?"

Ins had already mentally counted out the money for dinner against the money she had left before next payday. "No, thank you," she said. "But thank you for the coffee. I'll have to admit I don't think anything could get me out of this restaurant before that man comes back for his violin. Think of the look on his face!"

Not five minutes passed before the man was back. He had a ragged wallet in his pocket now, and carefully counted out the money for his meal. "So, about that violin," the waitress said, and glanced nervously at Ins. "You know, my nephew is thinking of taking up violin and my sister could really use an instrument. Would you be willing to sell it?"

"But," Ins whispered. The waitress pulled down a piece of the peach pie, Iris's favorite, and set it down in front of Iris like a promise.

"Oh, I couldn't sell it," the man said. "It's my livelihood. I play on street corners ... even in wartime, or maybe especially in wartime, people like to hear music. It lifts their spirits. I'd be happy to play for you, to thank you for your understanding about the wallet ."

The waitress shook her head impatiently. "Surely you'd be willing, for the right price. You said you paid fifty? I'll give you a hundred."

The man shook his head. "I paid fifty, but it's a better violin than that. I couldn't let it go for less than five hundred."

"Two hundred," the waitress said.

"Wait," Iris said, with a glare at the waitress. She elbowed the pie aside. "Don't listen to her. There was a man here a few minutes ago who said your violin was really valuable. He said he'd pay two hundred thousand dollars for it, and you should call his office tomorrow, collect. He lives in New York City ..." She dug in her own coat pocket and triumphantly produced Leo's business card. "Leo Franklin. Leo like the lion, Franklin like the President."

The waitress's glare could have soured whiskey. Ins averted her eyes, feeling a little guilty, but really, how unfair and wrong, not to tell a man what his property was worth if you knew. "I think you should wait and sell the violin tomorrow."

The man turned toward Iris, cocked his head to one side, and looked her up and down. It was a strange look—not the look of a poor man who'd just learned that his property was worth thousands of dollars. More the look of a fox that had approached the henhouse and found it locked. But then he gave her a wistful smile and said, "I thank you, ma'am." His lips twitched as he turned to the waitress. "As kind as your offer was, I think I shall have to refuse it." He glanced down at the pie. "Since it seems I am about to come into some money, ma'am, let me thank you by paying for your meal." He counted out the money for sandwich, soup, coffee, and pie, and even included a generous tip. "Good night to both of you."

Iris ate her pie quickly, the waitress's stony glare made her nervous. She braced herself for the wind and rain and stepped out.

To her relief, the rain had stopped while she was eating, replaced with a thick fog. She crossed the street to wait for her bus, thinking over the evening, and stepped forward when she saw headlights coming toward her in the fog. But instead of a bus, a black Lincoln town car pulled up. The window rolled down, and Leo looked out at her from the passenger-side window. "Can I offer you a ride, ma'am?"

"Oh!" She stepped backward, startled to see him. He said he was catching a train—why is he in a car? "I gave the man your card. The waitress wasn't going to tell him, can you believe it? She was going to buy it for a hundred dollars and sell it to you herself!"

"Let me show you something," Leo said, and climbed out of the car. He opened the trunk and Iris looked in to see a dozen identical violin cases. "We paid $25 each for them. The man you saw inside is an associate of mine—he's driving the car, in fact. We, ahem, test the honesty of waitresses, bartenders, and restaurant owners all over this great country of ours." He closed the trunk.

Iris stared at him, speechless.

"They say you can't cheat an honest man. That's not true. It's easy to cheat an honest man, if he assumes that others are as honest as he is. But as a matter of principle, I won't cheat an honest man." He doffed his hat, held it to his chest, and bowed to Iris. "Would you like a souvenir, ma'am? A violin, perhaps? I hear there's a man in New York City who'll pay two hundred thousand dollars for violins."

"I don't need anything from you," she said.

"No, but I have a small gift for you, regardless." His hat still in his hand, he covered his face with it momentarily, then set it back on his head and said, "Your soldier will come home safe. You should marry him, because he will make an excellent husband to you. You will have many, many happy years together, and two children, a girl and a boy."

Iris shook her head. "You could say that to any girl in Washington and she'd think you had the second sight."

"You're right, of course. But your soldier is named Ben—Bennie, really, but he prefers Ben. And you will be very happy together." A final bow, and Leo got back into the car, and disappeared in the night.

**"I can't believe you didn't tell anybody."**

The Virginia farmhouse, two months later, was dark around them, their father long asleep; the lamp on the kitchen table guttered a little, and Iris's sister Reva adjusted the glow.

"Why?" Iris asked.

"Well, he was a con man. He as much told you so, he had a trunk full of violins! You could've called the police. Or just told your boss the next day, you work for the FBI."

"But if the waitress had given him the money, she would have deserved it, don't you think? She was trying to cheat him."

"For all you know, she has family at home who need that money to live on. What did they do to deserve being cheated?"

"Well, but she didn't buy that violin."

"Only because you stopped her!"

"I should go back there and tell her. Might make her more appreciative. Right now she's probably cursing my name every night."

"Probably."

"How do you think he knew that my soldier's name is Ben?"

"You probably mentioned it and just forgot."

"No. I didn't. Besides, if I did, how did he know that Ben's given name is Bennie?"

"Maybe you had a letter, and dropped it."

"I thought of that, but I checked. I keep all of Ben's letters in a box at home, and they're all there."

"Well, maybe he does have the second sight. It would be useful for a con man, don't you think?" Reva shook her head again. "I can't believe you didn't tell anyone ..."

Ben will understand, Iris thought. She had already told him the story; she'd written to him about it the same night it happened, and sent the letter off to the base in England where he was stationed. It took months for his reply to reach her, but when it did, she could almost hear the chuckle in his Yankee voice as she read. "I'm glad to hear that your con man at least bought you some good peach pie. As for that waitress, if she had been cheated, it would've served her right for trying to cheat a man out of his violin. As for him knowing my name—well, my mother has the second sight, or so I was always told. I've never seen as it does her much use. Maybe she should go into violin sales. At any rate, I'm glad to hear the con man thinks I'll be coming home to you, because I'd like to introduce you to my mother one of these days. And I can hardly wait to see your beautiful smile again."

Fortune Teller
June 17th, 1952
Campbell County, Virginia

Nights were dark in the country. People kept saying that there'd be electricity at all the farms within three years, but no matter how many years passed, electricity to Iris and Ben's farm always seemed to be about two years away. Ben was in town, working the night shift at his new job at the gas company. Upstairs, Iris could hear her father coughing, and cringed a little inside, listening.

They said just a few months. Months, not years. It's not like the electricity: there will be a spot in the Catawba sanatorium once he gets to the top of the list. We'll just keep all our windows open and hope for the best. I wouldn't worry so much if it weren't for Mitzi.

No child should be exposed to tuberculosis, but Mitzi was already so small and weak. Born a little too early and a little too small, the doctor had told Iris she couldn't risk breastfeeding her, then the formula had made her sick, and for months she hadn't gained weight. Now at five she weighed less than thirty pounds. Eric, the baby, was almost twenty pounds already, grown fat and cheerful on his mother's milk. Iris did her best to keep her children away from her father, and boiled every sheet and pillowcase in the house daily, drawing the water up from the well on the porch and heating it on the stove.

Daddy has nowhere else to go. Nowhere. He went into debt for the first time in his life to send me to business school. It's not his fault he got sick.

I have to trust in God. God wouldn't punish me for doing the right thing by my Daddy, would He?

Then again, Daddy never did anything to deserve tuberculosis, either.

She heard the crunch of someone's footstep outside. "Ben?" she said, hopefully, though it was hours until he would usually get home.

"Ma'am?"

She opened the door and looked out onto the porch. A ragged-looking man stood on the porch, a bundle of something tucked under his arm. She felt a brief prickle of fear, but the bundle was just a ragged knapsack, and he didn't look dangerous, just poor. He did a slight double-take when he saw her, and she thought he must have expected her husband. "My husband is working in town, but my father is upstairs, if you need a man for something," she said. "It's a strange time for a visit. Do you need help?"

He was silent for a moment, then said, "I'm hungry, ma'am. I was just wondering if I could have some food in exchange for doing a few chores." He had a jumpy, rangy look, and his eyes were hollow.

"I'm not going to set a hungry man to working. Come on into the kitchen if you want something to eat. We can talk about chores once you're fed."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, and followed her into the house.

Despite his hollow eyes, he was clean; inside, she saw that his clothes were mended, though he had holes in his shoes. There were fresh eggs, and bread, so she made him eggs on toast. There was

plenty of bread left—Mitzi had picked at her supper, as usual. Iris made herself an egg as well, and then sat down at the kitchen table. Upstairs, she heard her father coughing again.

"What's your name?" she asked the stranger after he'd eaten half his eggs.

"Joe Truman. Joe like the ballplayer, Truman like the President of the United States of America."

"I am Mrs. Greene."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am. And your eggs are very fine. Thank you. I'd like to repay your kindness, now, if you've got any chores that need doing."

"I'd just love it if you'd sit here while I cut some wood for the stove, and come get me if my baby wakes up and cries, or if my father needs anything."

"Ma'am, please let me cut some wood for you."

"All right, then. Wood's out back. I'll get you a lantern to take with you."

Iris washed the dishes. She went upstairs, to check on her father—his eyes were closed, and if he wasn't asleep, he pretended to be. Downstairs again, she washed her hands, and then checked on Mitzi and Eric. Eric sometimes woke this time of night to nurse, but now he was asleep, sprawled dimpled and content on his sheets. Mitzi had kicked her sheet and blanket off; it was a warm night, but Iris smoothed the sheet back over her daughter anyway. Truman, like the President of the United States of America

Iris stepped out the back door and watched as the man split a log into sticks of kindling. The kerosene lantern rested on top of the wood pile, casting a circle of yellow light. His sleeves were rolled up, and he'd already chopped a fair amount of wood. Iris watched him for several minutes, until he looked up and saw her. "What happened to the car?" she asked.

"Ma'am?"

"The big car with all the violins in the trunk. And your friend the violinist, what happened to him?"

"My partner decided to run off with my share of the money. That's the danger of working with a con man—sometimes you get conned. So I decided I didn't need a partner anymore, and I traded in for a different gig."

"Offering to work for food?"

"If you knock on a stranger's door and ask to come in for a friendly chat, sometimes they set the dog on you."

"Wash up and come back on in the house. I don't want to be gone for too long." And I don't trust you out here without someone to keep an eye on you.

"Yes, ma'am."

Back in the house, all was quiet and still. The man's knapsack was under the kitchen table; Iris wondered what she'd find in it if she looked. More violins? Patent snake oil guaranteed to cure baldness, madness, tuberculosis? Stock certificates for a silver mine?

"A crystal ball, actually," the stranger—Leo, she thought, that's what he called himself before—said from the doorway. "I tell fortunes these days." He settled himself back at the kitchen table, uninvited. "I did well by yours, didn't I? Ben came home. He's a good husband, not like your sister's truck driver, whose trips keep getting longer and longer. You have a daughter and a son, just like I said."

"You're an awful good guesser," Iris said.

"Do you want me to tell your fortune again?"

Tell me if we'll be safe from TB. Tell me if my daughter will grow up healthy. Tell me if we'll be able to stay in Virginia or if we'll lose our farm like Ben's family lost his when he was a young man ... Iris bit her lip and turned her back on him. "No," she said. Trust in God, not in charming violin salesmen who know things that are none of their business.

Behind her, she heard the man sigh. "You're my worst nightmare and my fondest recollection, Miss At-least-they-didn't-name-me-Petunia," he said.

"I should get my Daddy and have him throw you out." Or get that shotgun that Ben taught me how to use.

"Let your Daddy sleep. I'll leave if you ask. Though it would warm my heart if you'd give me a cup of tea first."

The room was already too warm, but Iris added some wood to the stove and put the kettle on. "You can have your cup of tea, and then I think I'll need to say good night to you."

"Yes ma'am."

The water was hot. she made him a cup of tea and set it down in front of him, not sitting down herself. He downed it meekly, in silence. The minutes ticked by.

"Just tell me if my daughter will grow up healthy," Iris said. "That's all I want to know. Eric's a big, strong boy, I don't worry about him, even with my father upstairs, but Mitzi . ."

The stranger let out his breath in a sigh, and for a moment her blood went cold. But then he said, "Your daughter will grow up healthy. She'll have three children of her own someday." He straightened up in his chair, turning his cup around and around in his hands as if he were reading the leaves, even though she'd used a tea bag. "She's going to become a college professor. In fact, both of your children are going to become college professors."

Iris laughed out loud at that. Ben had tried to go to college before the war, but his family hadn't been able to afford it after the first year.

"You think that's funny? Your Ben's going to go back to college, and when he graduates he'll become a teacher. You, great lady, will have to settle for working at a college. You're going to have to move to Ohio, because after the Browns win their lawsuit, no Virginia school district is going to be willing to hire a Yankee schoolteacher but you'll like Ohio."

I can't believe a word this man is saying, she thought.

The man set his empty cup down and picked up his bag. He put his hat on and turned to go. "When a con man tells fortunes, he doesn't usually tell the good parts. He tells the bad, and hints of dire fates that can be averted only by copious payment to the piper. But I do not cheat honest men, and I remember you, ma'am, even if that waitress has long since forgotten about the night she almost bought a Stradivarius violin. Let me tell you one more thing about Mitzi," he added, and her heart leapt to her throat. "I'll tell you that she won't much care for that nickname when she gets older. Amelia is going to want people to call her Amy." And with that, he stepped down off the porch and strode away into the night, leaving the house quiet and still.

Iris washed and dried the teacup and put it away. I never told him Mitzi's real name, she thought. I really hope that means the rest of what he said was true. College for Ben and for both my children! But I'm not sure how we'd manage that for Ben, even with the government money ... we'd need money to live on, we barely scrape by as it is.

Well, maybe after my father goes to the sanatorium, we can move into Lynchburg and I can open a nursery school. Take care of some of the children in the neighborhood. Maybe Ben can keep working nights, go to classes during the day. Maybe .

If it's meant to be, then of course we'll be able to find a way.

Petunia Lucky
Springfield, Ohio
October 25th, 1999

The house was far too quiet with Ben gone. It was strange: he'd been in a nursing home for a few months before he died, not living at home, yet the house was far quieter now than it was then. There was the TV for noise, and Blossom, the old Airedale terrier, would pad around the house after Iris, but it didn't help much. If only people lived closer ... but Amy lived in Wisconsin, Eric lived in Canada, even the grandchildren were scattered around the country.

Iris couldn't hear the mail arrive, but Blossom could, she pricked up her ears even half-asleep, and Iris got up to bring it in. Bills, charitable requests, sales pitches, and more bills. It was strange how expensive it was just to die. Ben had died in August, and it seemed

like she was still getting bills related to his death PAST DUE, one of them said in accusing red letters, though Iris was quite certain she'd paid every bill she'd seen. She sat down with a sigh and opened the envelope. ENVIRONMENTAL PERMIT FEES / INTERMENT, the bill said. It had the seal of the State of Ohio on it and some other gobbledygook, and the amount at the bottom was $824, plus a 10 percent fee for being late, so $906 40 in all. She groaned and reached for the checkbook again.

Something made her stop, though, and take a closer look. It looked like something from the state, but it was a plain post office box address on the self-addressed envelope inside. Was this even a real bill, or was it someone trying to take advantage of a grieving older woman by sending bills knowing she might not know how to tell a real bill from a fake?

A horrible suspicion struck her, and she went upstairs to her filing cabinet. She recognized the bills from the funeral home, the bills from the doctor and the nursing home, but there were six more bills that, on close examination, she realized had been sent from similarly suspicious post office boxes, though each had a different number. And she'd paid them. One for $64, one for $135, one for $214, one for $265, one for $412, and one for $524 13. One thousand six hundred and fourteen dollars. And thirteen cents. She felt sick. How could I have been so gullible? Why didn't I look more closely at these? If only Ben were here ... And that made her cry again, alone in her little sewing room, until Blossom dragged her creaking self upstairs to lick her hand and wag her tail and ask for a walk, even though as old as Blossom was, she was happier staying home. She knows I need a walk, though. She's a good dog.

Out in the fresh air, Iris felt a little calmer. It was a beautiful October day: the sky was blue, the air was crisp, the leaves were changing colors. Her neighbors had pumpkins out on their front step—it would be time to go buy candy soon, for the Trick-Or-Treaters. She'd get to see all the neighborhood kids dressed up in costumes, that was always so much fun. After she'd thought for a while about pleasant things, she felt a bit better.

But now what do I do? The gall of sending her a bill marked overdue when they had already billed her out of over sixteen hundred dollars made Iris shake her head. They say you can't cheat an honest man, but it was my honesty that they were taking advantage of. They knew I'm the sort of person who takes care of bills as quickly as I can. They knew that from the very first bill I paid.

Maybe my son-in-law can help. Amy had married a thoroughly reliable man. Iris's son-in-law was able to straighten out all kinds of mix-ups. But the thought of explaining to him that she'd paid six fake bills without realizing it made her cheeks flush. No, it's too embarrassing. I'll just live a little more frugally for a while. Make up the money. And forget about it.

It could make a person angry, though.

For the first time in years, Iris found herself thinking about the violin man—Leo Franklin or Joe Truman or whatever his real name was. He'd probably be calling himself Will Clinton these days. It was a little absurd to think that the world needed more of any kind of con man, but ... if it's going to have con men, I think I like the sort of con men that take advantage of dishonesty rather than honesty.

Back in her house, she was drinking a glass of iced tea when someone knocked at her door. For a moment, she imagined that it would be her long-ago visitor, back again for some reason, but when she opened the door it was a young man, not an old one. He started to say something about a truckload of meat that was going to spoil if he didn't find people to buy it, and she shook her head and said, "I really don't eat much meat anymore."

He looked into her face and then said, "My name is Leo Clinton. Leo like the boy who went down with the *Titanic*, Clinton like the President of the United States of America."

It's him. She hesitated for a moment, but . . Leo never did me any wrong. Why not ask him what he thinks. He might know if I have any chance of getting my money back. "Come on in, Leo," she said. "I'll get you some iced tea."

The TV was on when he came in, blaring to the empty room; she shut it off. "You'll have to pardon me if I miss some of what you're saying. I'm a bit deaf these days, though I do wear a hearing aid." She poured two glasses of iced tea. Blossom came over to investigate the stranger, sniffed him a few times, then flopped back down by the door.

"Many years of happiness, yes?" Leo said when she sat down. "Just like I told you."

"Fifty-three," Iris said. "Fifty-three years and six months."

"All of them happy?"

Iris thought about the Alzheimer's, the Parkinson's, the broken hip and pneumonia, the last weeks when Ben was so frail and helpless. "I wouldn't trade even one day of that time for anything," she said, "even though I'm a little absurd to think that the world needed more of any kind of con man, but ... if it's going to have con men, I think I like the sort of con men that take advantage of dishonesty rather than honesty.

It was a little absurd to think that the world needed more of any kind of con man, but ... if it's going to have con men, I think I like the sort of con men that take advantage of dishonesty rather than honesty.

said, knowing that her voice had faltered a bit. Leo didn't say anything, so she added, "He wrote poems for me—every birthday, every Valentine's Day, every anniversary, until the Alzheimer's made that too hard for him. My daughter typed up all his poems last year and had them bound into a book for us. My granddaughters read some of those poems at Ben's funeral."

"I never met your husband," Leo said. "But I know he must have been a fine man."

"He was so good to me," Iris said. "He was the best husband in the world."

"I'm very sorry for your loss, ma'am."

"Thank you."

Outside, a truck rumbled past.

"About those bills you were wondering about," Leo said. "Those weren't me."

"I know," Iris said. "You said you only cheat the dishonest." The unfairness of it welled up again for a moment and she sighed deeply and put her glass down. "Well, what's done is done, I guess. I don't suppose calling the police will make any difference."

"They'll take your report, if that's what matters to you. But if it were easy to catch con men then fewer people would be conned. Con men are a slippery bunch."

"You would know."

"They don't come more slippery than me." He gave her an amiable grin. Was he always so young? she wondered. He looked old when I saw him the first time. Well, maybe not old, but older than me.

"You think there isn't anything I can do."

"No, I'm saying that going to the police probably won't get you your money back. I have another option, if you're interested."

"What's that?"

"Cheat the cheater. I can help you figure out who got your money, and I can help you clean out his bank account. We'll have to work together, though. Some cons work best with two. Are you with me?"

Iris thought it over. It could be dangerous, she thought. I wish Ben

could advise me—what would Ben do? Her responsible son-in-law would never countenance it, that was certain ..

She smiled. "All right," she said. "I'll give it a try."

**"The first step is to find out who our mark really is. His post** office box is undoubtedly under a false name, but that's okay, we'll find out the real one." The box address had been in Xenia, so they'd driven there to stake out the post office. "It only takes a day for mail to get from here to there. You paid promptly every other time, so he'll no doubt be checking his box today."

On Leo's instructions, Iris had sent, not a check, but a written request to pay in installments. "You don't want to give the mark any more of your money, but you don't want him to know you're on to him, either. He'll have to write back and tell you it's fine, and then check back for your first payment in a couple of days, so if we somehow miss spotting him today, we'll have another chance. He's got box number 3536. Your job is to loiter in the lobby. I'll wait out front in the car. When you see the mark, don't talk to him, just make sure you follow him out so I see who he is, too. Then try to follow him to his car so that you can see the license plate number. Remember it, and then write it down as soon as you can. Not while he can see you."

Iris had worried that someone would ask her what she was doing standing around in the entryway to the post office, but no one did.

The wait was boring. She had to watch box 3536 like a hawk, while not looking like she was watching it, since the man—the mark—might notice that. Leo had thought the mark would be there early, and sure enough, in the morning rush, Iris glimpsed him. He wasn't opening the mail, just shoving it into the pocket of his coat; she turned and followed him.

"Here, allow me."

"Thank you." She realized the mark had just held the door for her. She paused to let him get ahead of her, and then fell into step behind him, trailing after him to keep an eye on him in the parking lot. And there was the car: a red sedan. Iris didn't really know cars, but this one was shiny and very new-looking. Ripping off old ladies must pay well. License plate. License plate. She spotted it as he pulled away, and realized it was one of those plates with a word on it. MR LKY. Mr. Lucky.

"Do we follow his car?" Iris asked.

"No, that's much too easy to spot. No, our next stop is the police station. You're going to get us his name and address."

I..mr.

"They're not supposed to give that out, but you're not a suspicious character. You're a sweet older woman, and if you have a good story, you can get any information out of them that you ask for, I bet. Can you think up a good story?"

"I'll have to consider that," Iris said, and leaned back and closed her eyes. "Let me know when we get there."

**"Excuse me, young lady. I was wondering if you could help** me, please."

The receptionist looked up. She was about the age of Iris's daughter—fifty—and clearly a little startled to be addressed as "young lady," but she smiled kindly at Iris when she saw her white hair. "I'll do what I can, ma'am. What's the problem?"

"I was wondering if you could give me the name and address of the person with this license plate." Iris spread out the torn piece of notebook paper on which she'd written MR LKY.

"We're not supposed to just give those out. Did he sideswipe you or something?" The receptionist frowned.

"Oh, no, nothing like that. Oh, I'm so embarrassed about this." Iris sighed. "You see, I was in a parking lot and when I opened my car door I hit his car and made a dent. I knew I should leave a note for him with my name and address, but the pen in my purse didn't work. So I went into the grocery store to borrow a pen and while I was in there, he must have come back, because when I came out his car was gone. I feel just terrible. It was such a nice car. Shiny new paint. He must just hate me. Or what if his wife was driving it, if he has a wife? He'll probably blame her. If I just knew his address I could send him a letter through the mail and offer to pay to fix it."

The receptionist was standing up, a kind smile on her face. "You wait right here, ma'am, I'll see what I can do."

To Iris's horror, the receptionist returned with a police officer. Was it illegal to ding someone's car and walk away without leaving a note? Iris felt faint with horror, but he just said, "I hear you want to make things right with some man with a red car?" There was nothing for it, so Iris swallowed hard and told the story again.

"Aw, let her have it," the police officer said, and the receptionist handed over a folded note. "Don't tell anyone we gave this to you, okay?"

"I won't. Thank you, I appreciate it so much," Iris said, and fled, clutching her purse hard enough that she thought her knuckles were probably bone white.

Back in the car, Leo laughed at the look on her face. "You got it! You did, I can tell. Let's see what Mr. Lucky's real name is. Or at least the name on his driver's license, which is probably also the name on his bank account." Iris unfolded the note and they looked at it: Jason Beckett, 1 North Pine Circle, Xenia. It had a phone number, too.

"Now what?" Iris said.

"Now we wait till the sun goes down the night before garbage day, and go dumpster-diving in Mr. Lucky's trash."

**"This is why everyone should own a paper shredder."**

Mr. Lucky lived in a gated community, as it turned out, but Iris was able to get them in by explaining to the security guard that she couldn't remember the house number or the phone number, but that Leo was taking her to her granddaughter's friend's house for her

"I've been under a lot of stress lately, and I think that's aging me prematurely. Trust me. By tomorrow, I don't think anyone will raise an eyebrow when I say we're getting married.

great-granddaughter's first birthday party. Great granddaughter. Well, if one of my grandchildren ever gets around to having children of their own, maybe I'll have one of those. She couldn't remember the house number but she knew the street, it was Pine Circle, and her granddaughter had promised balloons out front, and maybe a banner. The guard waved her through. Once at Pine Circle, they found garbage cans sitting neatly out on the curb. Leo handled this part, popping the trunk open, then throwing the bags in and driving off before anyone saw them.

"Good party?" the security guard asked, seeing them again.

Iris shook her head, baffled. "I must have the address wrong."

"She says she has it written down at home," Leo said. "We're going to go check." He squeezed her hand and the guard gave him an understanding nod.

They drove all the way back to Springfield, dumped the bags of actual garbage out by Iris's trash, and then hauled the sack of paper garbage inside to her dining room, where they could sort through it. To her chagrin, Iris found her own note, crumpled, mixed in with the rest of the paper. There were notes from others, as well—

requests for itemized bills, pleas for more time to pay. "Quite the cottage industry," Leo murmured. Iris looked for envelopes with the addresses of other victims, but didn't find any.

"Bingo." Leo exclaimed, holding up a folded printout. It was a bank statement, complete with balances and account numbers. High balances· his checking account alone had $42,328.31 in it. Mr. Lucky's was the only name on the account. "We still need his signature," Leo said. They found it near the bottom of the pile: a faded carbon from a credit card charge.

Iris looked at the crumpled notes from the other "creditors." "Could we take this to the police?" she asked. "Would they do anything?"

"We could take it to the police," Leo said. "They'd probably be able to arrest him with this. Then the judge would let him out on bail, and off he'd go, and a week later he'd have a new name, and a new address, and a new post office box. He'd find a way to clean out his bank account on his way out of town. You'd never see your money again. Do you want to go to the police, or do you want to clean out Mr. Lucky?"

One thousand six hundred and fourteen dollars. Iris thought about it. "Clean him out," she said.

"Great. Next we're going to take advantage of the great institution of branch banking, where you can pick your geography and guarantee that the teller won't know your name. I'm going to be Mr. Lucky, and you're going to be my lovely bride, Petunia Smith."

"Aren't we going to have to sign something?"

"I'll handle all the forgery."

Iris looked at him dubiously. "You're younger than my son."

"I've been under a lot of stress lately, and I think that's aging me prematurely. Trust me. By tomorrow, I don't think anyone will raise an eyebrow when I say we're getting married."

**The bank was heated much too warmly. Iris thought, sitting** in the chair, clasping her purse. Leo's hair had gone snow-white overnight, and his face appeared drastically aged. They'd shaken hands with the banker. Leo had introduced himself as Jason Beckett and explained that he wanted to add Petunia to his account and make it joint. "We're getting married," he said with a conspiratorial smile. "This is my lovely bride, Petunia."

"Congratulations," the teller said warmly. "Petunia, you said?"

"I'm just so thankful my parents didn't name me Heliotrope," Iris said faintly.

"Well, we'll just need you to fill out some forms . ." Out came the forms. Iris filled out the form as Petunia Smith, using a made-up address and Social Security number. Surely they have Mr. Lucky's number on file; how is Leo planning to get that?

"Ugh," Leo said as he was filling out his form, and put down his pen. "I'm having a senior moment here, I think. I can't remember my social."

The banker glanced at her computer screen. "I can give it to you if you can show me some photo ID," she said.

"No, that's okay, it's coming back to me now," he said with a broad smile, and filled out the rest of the form. Iris was perplexed for a moment, then remembered that he seemed to be able to read thoughts. I wonder if he's reading my mind right now? He glanced up with a raised brow for her, and then signed Mr. Lucky's signature with a flourish.

"I'll need to see some picture ID," the banker said when they were done. "It's just routine, you understand."

Leo shook his head slowly, his eyes a little wide. "Neither of us drive," he said.

"Surely you have the state IDs for nondrivers."

"I'm not in the habit of carrying it," Iris said.

"It's been a long time since I was carded," Leo said.

"Can't you just put it through anyway?" Iris said. "You know, we were really hoping to run off and get married today." She leaned forward and in a whisper added, "Our children don't approve. We wanted to get this all taken care of before they could find out."

"Well, I ..." The banker glanced at both of them. "Oh, all right. I'll just put down that you showed me state ID cards. You do have them, don't you? Okay."

Petunia's name added to the account, they left the bank and drove to a different branch, where Iris filled out another form to transfer nearly the entire balance of Mr. Lucky's account into yet another account. This time she went in by herself, but Leo gave her the account numbers and told her what to move where.

Finally, Leo dropped her off at home. "I'll be back tomorrow morning," he said. "We need to give the banks time to get the money actually moved over—right now it's just moved over on paper—and then we can withdraw the entire amount. We'll use cash, because that's untraceable. Can you be ready at around ten?"

"I surely can," she said.

The interior of her house was cool and a little dim; she fed Blossom and then turned on the TV. Thinking over the last couple of days, she alternated between nervous giggles and a rising sense of fear. All that money. Over forty-two thousand dollars. Will they send me to jail, if they catch us? Will they let me tell the jury that he stole my money first?

She could scarcely sleep that night. My guilty conscience, she thought. I've been greedy. He only took sixteen hundred dollars from me. I stole . . She had to turn on the light to work out the exact sum. Over twenty six times what he stole from me. Well, if this works, maybe I'll try to figure out who else he stole from, and give the money to them. She had no idea how she'd track down the other victims, but the thought comforted her enough to sleep.

She was ready for Leo by nine-thirty, and sat on her front porch, watching one of her neighbors setting out Halloween decorations: a plastic ghost, a witch crashing her broomstick into a tree, a giant grinning pumpkin that was inflated by a fan. The mail arrived, and the mailman gave her a wave. She looked at her watch: it was ten-thirty, and there was no sign of Leo. She picked up her mail to take it in the house, and saw an envelope with a hand-addressed label. It wasn't the handwriting of anyone in her family. She sat back down and opened it up.

"My dear, dear Iris," the letter said. "Please accept my apologies for my failure to arrive this morning on schedule. I think I did warn you once that con men sometimes get conned by their partners, and that I only cheat the dishonest. And stealing a man's money is truly not an honest thing to do, even if he did steal from you first.

A small sheaf of bills slipped out of the envelope and onto her lap, followed by a dime and three pennies.

"I'm sure by now that you've started thinking about it, and don't really want most of that money, anyway. I have, however, enclosed one thousand six hundred and fourteen dollars and thirteen cents. It is in unmarked bills and will get you in no trouble with your own bank.

"In case thinking this over starts to worry you at all, let me reassure you on a couple more points. The bank cameras were not working that day, and even if the banker who handled our account sees you at a later time, she will find you only faintly familiar; she won't remember you as the clever schemer who raided the account of one of their customers.

"I do not think we'll meet again, but it has been a great pleasure knowing you, and an even greater pleasure working with you. By the way, this time next year, you will be a great-grandmother. Have a wonderful Halloween."

The letter was signed, C. She wondered if that was supposed to stand for Clinton, or if it stood for his real name.

Well. That was quite an adventure. She went to get Blossom's leash to take her out for a walk to the bank, to deposit her money. It was mostly in tens and twenties, but there was one crisp, new hundred-dollar bill. With a faint feeling of mischief—someday, my ever-responsible daughter and son-in-law will have to go through these—she attached the hundred-dollar bill to the letter with a paper clip and then filed it away.

Won't this just make them wonder. ❧

# LIVING a Dream

Dreams can come true. Just talk to Scott M. Fischer. "Back in the fourth grade I said, 'I want to make the art for *Dungeons & Dragons*,'" he remembers. "To have grown up and actually done it is just amazing. I've been so lucky."

Luck may have had something to do with it, but it doesn't hurt that Scott is what might be considered insanely positive and enthusiastic, not to mention hard-working and talented. His can-do attitude makes every challenge he's encountered sound like a pleasure.

"For example, most artists would have been shaking in their shoes to take on the legacy of illustrating fairy tale legend Peter Pan in the first (!) authorized sequel to J.M. Barrie's hundred-year-old classic *Peter Pan in Kensington Garden*. Arthur Rackham, the original illustrator and art legend, casts a long, long shadow. Any artist would have thought twice. As Scott tells it, he didn't have the luxury of getting nervous.

"Luckily I had to do it so incredibly fast that I didn't really have time to think about the enormity of it. I got completely immersed. It was such a fever of activity, doing 40 illustrations over a month. I sent my wife and daughter down to Florida, hermit. All I did was work.

"How it came about was Tony DiTerlizzi did the cover but didn't have time to do the illustrations, so the publisher, Simon & Schuster, asked if I could step in. Luckily, we both live in Massachusetts, nearby each other, so I went over to Tony's house and got a chance to kick it around with him."

Scott's decision to paint silhouettes for the illustrations was, in part, an homage to the original illustrator. "Arthur Rackham was famous not only for illustrating *Peter Pan*—and so many other fairy tales—but for silhouettes.

After talking it over with Tony we agreed that silhouettes were

have an idea of what Peter Pan looks like. It wouldn't be the same book if I'd gone in and drawn every eye and every ear. This had to be as timeless as Peter Pan him-

*Scott M. Fischer uses his blind eye to push the boundaries of his art and messages to have a lot of fun, too*

SPREAD: Cover for *Waterdeep: City of Splendor* D&D
TOP RIGHT: *Telling Time*
Image: The Gathering
ABOVE: *The Beholder*
D&D *Monster Manual*
All © Wizards of the Coast

...self. And the silhouette approach... was another way to pay homage ...to Rackham.

Let me tell you, my real "aw..." moment came when I was doing... the illustration for Captain Hook's... pirate ship, the *Jolly Roger*. It literally... got chills.

*Peter Pan in Scarlet* by Geraldine McCaughrean made Scott a *New York Times* best-selling illustrator and further increased his interest in doing his own children's books. He'd already been illustrating the eight-book series *Secrets of Dripping Fang* by Dan Greenburg, as well as creating covers for adult and young adult publishers and illustrations for RPG and Magic cards. Now that dream is becoming a reality as well.

"*Twinkle*, his first solo flight, a... good nursery rhyme, will be published by Simon & Schuster this summer. "It's very exciting to see my first children's book about to hit the shelves," he says. "Stylistically, it's a real departure from my fantasy work. I kept it very simple. It had to be something more immediate, more fresh, more basic. ...wanted you to see the smudges ...see that there was a human involved."

For Scott, art was the goal from the early days. "My mom jokes that I came out of her womb holding a paintbrush." Supported by his artist mother who put down her paintbrush to raise a family—and then successfully returned to the easel at age 50—and his father, who, despite his military background, encouraged his son's artistic tendencies, Scott was... always aided and abetted in his artistic pursuits.

"Being an Air Force brat meant I had to entertain myself because we moved a lot, didn't know anyone in town, and besides, all our toys were packed. Once, when we had just arrived at a new base, my mother asked me what toy I wanted her to buy, to make up for all of my toys being shut up in boxes, and I asked for a package of tin foil. I made castles and dragons and other stuff with it. With art I could always entertain myself. And I could also use it as a way to meet people."

Fresh out of Savannah College of Art and Design, he got his first gig, painting 18 paintings in 15 days for White Wolf. "It was a baptism of fire," he remembers.

I started as an oil painter, then did concept work for Microsoft and game companies and got comfortable working with computers. So now I do both. But I always want to keep the hand in the work. I love blurring the line between what is computer and what is hand-generated so that it's seamless."

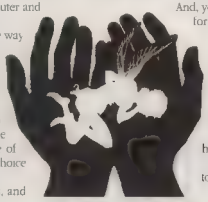
Scott has impressed a lot of people along the way. His client list includes Marvel, Microsoft, Nintendo, Simon & Schuster, Warner Bros., Del Rey Books, TOR, Harcourt, Wizards of the Coast, Lucas Film, and White Wolf, not to mention *Dungeons & Dragons*. On her blog, TOR art director and art world maven Irene Gallo says of Scott, "His excellent understanding of the human figure, combined with his bold sense of color and design, has made him the perfect choice for a broad range of genres and audiences."

Despite all the lively career developments, and the many worlds he's visited through them, Scott still gets excited when he speaks of his work illustrating *D&D* and *Magic: The Gathering*.

In part it's because of what I dreamed of as a child, but it's also because of the fans. They are simply the best fans in the universe. I hope to do at least one *Magic: The Gathering* card every year.

Scott's artwork for *D&D* and *Magic* is exuberant and dynamic, filled with movement and expressive postures combined with dramatic use of color. In his painting *Asmodeus* for *D&D*, he plays with the viewer's expectations, encouraging his or her participation. Form, contrast, and macabre humor predominate, with color functioning as an accent and focal point. Scott indulges in texture and pentimenti in the the background, using a looser, more painterly approach here to emphasize the abstract qualities of the piece.

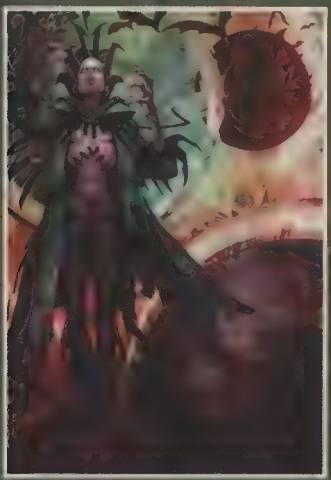
He was at work on a *Magic: The Gathering* card when we spoke. And, yes, he will gladly sign up to 15 *Magic* cards at a time for fans who send them to him with self-addressed stamped envelopes, and correct postage (see his website for details).



Upcoming projects include illustrations—in ballpoint pen—for a book of animal poetry by Rich Michaelson (Simon & Schuster). "Ballpoint pen is a surprisingly versatile, responsive medium."

Staying flexible about media is one of the skills Scott employs in developing what he calls his third eye.

"Every artist has to be able to develop a third eye—to know what you have to do, where, and when. It's an editing process, literally art-directing your own



ABOVE: *Melkor of the Clouded Mirror*, Magic: The Gathering, © Wizards of the Coast

OPPOSITE: Unkenhof, illustration for *Peter Pan in Scarlet* (Ivanhoe & Schussler), © Scott M. Fischer

FAR LEFT: Sergei Nosreani, *Magic: The Gathering*, © Wizards of the Coast

MIDDLE: *Jamie*, concept design © Wizards of the Coast

BOTTOM CENTER: *Death of 1000 Suns*, Magic: The Gathering, © Wizards of the Coast

work. So many young illustrators are so crushed by deadlines that they don't have time to let the work cool off and breathe."

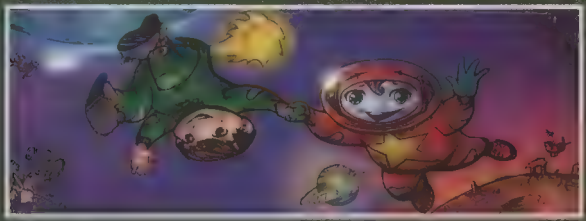
It was when I started taking the time to cool off that I started making real gains as an artist in terms of skill. I guess I'm talking about influences and how to get beyond them. It's when you can digest other artists' work, put it aside, and become more yourself that your work takes on a new dimension and originality. When I was starting out I spent so much time obsessing about other artists' work. When I stopped looking at them and started paying attention to what was inside of me and what I had to say, other people started paying attention to what I had to say, too.

"You have to know when to ask 'What can I say?' to move beyond those influences."

Scott still gives props to his favorite artists, among them Brom, Rick Berry, Mark Zug, Odd Nerdrum, Norman Rockwell, Phil Hale, and Gustav Klimt. "And I want to mention Mike Mignola. The way he thinks about shape and silhouette has been enormously influential to my art, even if it doesn't look like it."

He's also big on squinting. "Squinting is the most important skill I learned that from *Alla Prima: Everything I Know About Painting* by Richard Schmid. That book had a huge effect on me. Schmid really helped me open my third eye." He said "constantly squint at your paintings" and "don't commit to anything until you've squinted at it so long that the answer is obvious."

"My process now usually begins with a hand drawing. From that I work up the basic underpainting—the basic tones, etc.—on the computer, then paint it in oil. Often, I start by doodling, usually with my wife as my main model. I use parts of her combined with other references. I call it 'frankensteining' because I'm literally using a piece of this and a piece of that. So my wife can recognize her eyes in somebody else's face, for example. And it's always fun to



bring her along to conventions and introduce her as the model for a goblin or Nightmg, because she is so beautiful in reality."

The easiest subject to do is monsters. Nobody knows what they look like. Second easiest is men: after all, I am one. After that comes women, who've got to embody a certain emotion or else I'm not satisfied, and most difficult are kids. They're the hardest. With a child's head, for example, if you put one extra line in there, it makes them look too old."

Scott says he strives for balance.

"If I do too many occult SF books, I have to stop and get silly and let down—it's a yin and yang process. In fantasy art I've found a pretty good voice, but I'm always going to push those boundaries. And a different engine takes over when I do work for middle readers, and again, with children's books.

His personal work moves in painterly directions. "I call it abstract figurative. While drawing a figure I'm working against the representation. I like the added ambiguity. Look at Justin Sweet. He lets the viewer participate. That's a huge part. And occasionally, just for grins, I'll add something as random as the lid from a travel coffee mug. I know it's there but nobody else sees it.

"I think there's a painterly quality associated with my work. I'll nail the face, make it really tight and representational, and then the rest of the painting is my playground. I can make specific what needs to be specific and the rest I can play with, and everybody's happy."

His website, *www.fischart.com*, is filled with galleries, news, art for sale, and advice to young artists. Another website Scott recommends as a resource is *www.conceptart.org*: "It's almost better than going to art school. I post some pieces on it and get a lot of questions, so I'll post discussions about technique and breakdown what I did."

He's painted Peter Pan and Harry Potter, Star Wars, Magic the Gathering, and Dungeons & Dragons. If you asked Scott M. Fischer what he does for a living, he'd probably answer, "I'm living a dream." ❧

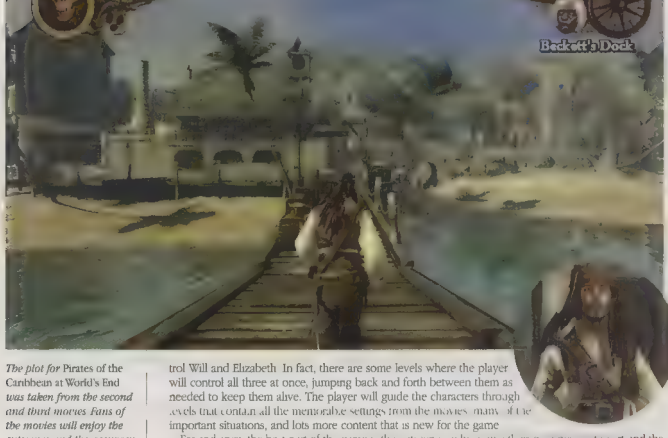
*ABOVE: Peter Pan, from* Peter Pan in Scarlet. *© Scott M. Fischer.*
*LEFT: Cover illustration for* The Secrets of Dripping Fang, *Book 1,* The Onset. *© Scott M. Fischer.*
*BELOW: Goddess: Magic The Gathering. © Wizards of the Coast.*
*OPPOSITE: (far left) [illegible] Book 7 of* The Secrets of Dripping Fang: Never Don't Eat the Children, If [illegible] *(far right) Scott's first [illegible] book, Dormouse Cover illustration for Twinkle [illegible] © Scott M. Fischer.*

By Eric T. Baker

# Fight alongside Captain Jack in the new *Pirates* game from Disney.

We are living in the second great Age of Piracy. At least when it comes to gaming. And not just people downloading illegal copies of games, either. There are currently so many games about the pirates of the first great Age of Piracy out on the market, or on their way to the market, that a player could go from one to the next and never game in any other period. It's rather like a few years ago when game companies rediscovered WWII and suddenly there were games in every genre set in that time. In the case of WWII, the reason was a blockbuster movie. For pirates, it is the same cause.

Disney's latest game based on its movie franchise is ***Pirates of the Caribbean at World's End,*** available on the all the major platforms and the PC, which takes elements of its plot from the second and third movies. Players start the game directing Jack, but by the time it is over they also get to control Will and Elizabeth. In fact, there are some levels where the player will control all three at once, jumping back and forth between them as needed to keep them alive. The player will guide the characters through levels that contain all the memorable settings from the movies, many of the important situations, and lots more content that is new for the game.




*The plot for* Pirates of the Caribbean at World's End *was taken from the second and third movies. Fans of the movies will enjoy the cutscenes and the accuracy of the characters, down to their voices, and locations.*

Far and away the best part of the game is the cutscenes, which showcase great voice talent and the voice acting. All the characters look amazingly like their movie character counterparts. The makers of most movie-to-game games (see below) could take lessons from the artists who created the character models for this one. Similarly, while the name actors didn't voice this game, the sound-alikes who did not only sound like the originals, but also deliver the lines with above average care and interest.

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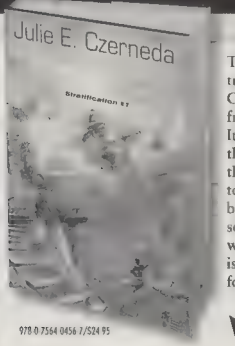


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The best interactive parts of the game are the boss duels. Here the action combat, with its button mashing and difficult multiple weapon options, is set aside so that the player's character and one villain can battle sword vs. sword. The controls during these fights are very simple. After the first couple, these dueling fights are relatively easy, and each one begins and ends with a humorous cutscene, integrating the best of the game with its combat.

Most of *PotCaWE* is spent fighting through the levels. There is a compass needle to make sure that the player never gets lost when looking for the next door or object he or she needs to move the story along. Helpful button icons pop up to indicate when the character can do something special or context-sensitive, but mostly the player will be mashing the sword attack button. For fans of the movie, and for people who are new to adventure video games, the good parts are worth the slow ones.

On the other hand, the designers at Treyarch have made a Spiderman game as each movie has come out, so their ***Spiderman 3*** game, which is also out on all the consoles and the PC, isn't really aimed at people who are coming to the franchise for the first time. While there is the obligatory tutorial, there is less help as the game goes along, and the button and action combinations are more complex. Players probably know by now if they like playing this version of Spidey, or if they have the reflexes to pull it off.

Unlike *PotCaWE* the cutscenes are not where *S3* shines. Spiderman, in both the red and black suits, looks good, but the renderings of the actors aren't terribly good. Many of the film's actors do contribute their voices (Kirsten Dunst is the only notable no-show), and Bruce Campbell is back as the narrator, but they either didn't try or weren't given the chance to overcome the script. All together, it will be a need for completeness more than an interest in seeing the next cinematic that will pull players through the game.

As with the movies, much of the game's wow factor is contained in swinging Spiderman about New York. In earlier games, this mechanic was simplified for the PC version. This time the PC version is just as open, and just as hard, as the console one. The mechanic is to let go of one string and shoot out the next one at the height of Spiderman's swing. Players who fall into the rhythm of this can cruise around the city, but one or two misses and player will find Spidey scraping along the city streets instead of soaring between the buildings. Most of the game's missions can be done just as easily, if not as coolly, by running from spot to spot, but swing-impaired players won't be able to complete the whole game.

The mission structure of *S3* is open-ended so that players pick which story, side, and bonus missions they wish to do in whichever order, or they can roam the streets stopping random crimes. Unlike previous versions, story missions unlock story missions and side missions unlock side missions, so players who don't want to play the unrelated side missions don't have to to complete the story. 'Course the reward for doing the side missions is to

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see more of Spidey's rogues gallery of enemies in action

From the opposite end of the video gaming world, both in hype and budget, is the first- person horror game, ***Penumbra: Overture Episode One*** for the PC from Swedish developer Frictional Games This game is not based on a movie, nor was it created with a multimillion dollar budget, nor does it contain the likeness or voice actng of any actor with a household name What *POEO* does have, however, is an intense and consistent atmosphere and a control mechanic that helps maintain it

The setup for the game is the lead character, Phillip, getting a letter from his father, who is 30 years dead by the time the letter arrives directing him to a safe deposit box that then points Phillip to an abandoned mine in Greenland. The rest of the game's action takes place in the mine, which is a fine, creepy, claustrophobic setting for a horror story The trend in FPS is to set them in enclosed spaces so the artists can keep their detail and frame rates up, but these short-draw spaces make more sense for a game about a normal man out of his depth than they do for a space marine batting the unknown

In keeping with the normal man theme, most of the game play in *POEO* consists of manipulating the game world in a reasonably normal way The best example is probably doors. In many first-person games, just standing next to a door is enough to make it slide open In *POEO*, the players not only turn the knob, they then push the door open however far they wish And given that the player is never quite sure what is lurking behind a door opening them a little at a time and "leaning" the point of view to see as much as possible is almost always a good idea

Beside opening doors, players will advance through the game by moving objects building simple bridges, and solving various puzzles, all with atmospheric sound that serves to increase the tension and creepiness. There is combat in the game, but it mostly results in the character's death, so it is best avoided And it often can be by simply crouching out of sight and waiting for the nastiness to move along

Other than the combat the only reservation about *POEO* is how short it is The game is only $20, so the length is about right for the price, but it makes it hard to evaluate the game's story since it has barely begun by the time this installment of the game is over Overall, though, there is more fun *POEO* than in lots of games costing three times as much

Another first-person game from a European studio is ***S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Shadow of Chernobyl***, from GSC Gameworld but distributed by THQ for the PC Length- and sizewise, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is as impressive as any game on the market As the title indicates, the game is set in the dead zone around the Chernobyl reactor which in the game's lore had a second meltdown in 1989 The game models both the large area of the dead zone, and the reactor itself in detail that may not be map accurate, but isn't just a lot of recycled textures either

The gameplay is sort of like *S3*, in that there are story missions and side missions that the

player can attack in about any order. The player's character is a fairly standard, fairly silent first-person shooter avatar, but just as there is a roleplay sort of approach to the missions, there is also a roleplay element to both how the player builds up the character's skills, and to how much the character can carry. Inventory is based on weight, and the character will need food and medicine (and vodka) as well as guns and ammo.

The horror in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is much more in the *Doom* mold than the *PDEO* mode. The way the character interacts with the world is mostly by shooting things. There are lots of scary things to shoot too, from other lone scavengers to packs of Chernobyl-style zombies. On the other hand, many of these other inhabitants can be talked to in the course of various missions and there are in fact six different endings to the game based on which choice the player made and who he or she did and did not ally the character with.

While *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is about as good as first-person shooting titles get, ***Touch the Dead,*** for the Nintendo Dual Screen from Eidos, is not. For one thing, it eschews any roleplaying elements for the standard formula of killing things, getting new guns, killing more things. More so, the player isn't really in control of the character because the game decides where the character moves and when. All the player is in charge of is choosing, shooting, and reloading the guns.

Perhaps it is simply the hardware limitations of the DS that make *TtD* what it is, but the game seems less sophisticated than the original *Doom*. Perhaps more likely is that the designers were attempting to create a shooter in the mold of an arcade light-gun game. The targets in *TtD* are zombies, and the player shoots them by putting the stylus on them on the touch screen, just as in an arcade the player would point the light gun at them. Holding the stylus down keeps the shooting going, but the guns fire faster if the player taps the stylus. The problem, of course, is that it just isn't as much fun to tap a stylus as it is to point a fake gun and pull a toy trigger.

Even if a stylus is a step down from a plastic gun, fun can still be had with *TtD* if it is played a short bit at a time. What bogs it down over long periods of play is the reloading mechanic. The player must drag ammo from the one side of the screen to the other to trigger the reload animation and enable the character to return to shooting. This is repetitive and time consuming, dangerously so for the character during some stretches where the zombies come particularly fast and furious.

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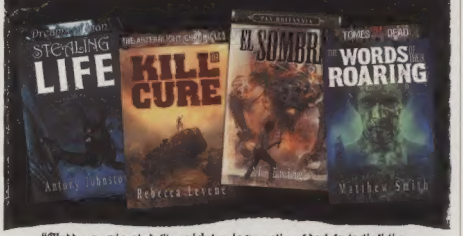


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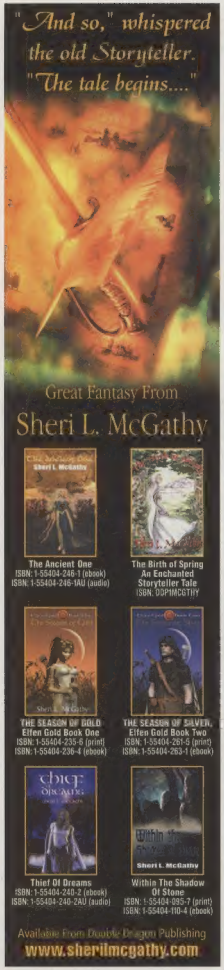



# bleeds

*Continued from page 45*

"I'm slipping away, I feel it."

"Don't," I said.

"Can't help it. We'll meet again. We already have, already will. Kiss me before we forget who we are."

I kissed her mouth, but midway through it I began to feel strange about her, then stranger. We broke apart from each other and I couldn't really see her face anymore. Dark rain swept between us. Then Rena screamed and lurched toward the wreckage, calling some lost boy's name in her cracking voice.

•

I sat alone in my car and didn't remember any of the strange stuff. My head hurt. Rain ticked on the roof. Beyond the flooded windshield blue and red and white lights strobed and highway patrolmen in rain slickers milled around watching the tow truck. Rena was in the backseat of one of the cruisers. And I found myself alone in the unguarded fortress of my heart. Moat drained, portcullis raised, etc. Piranha flopped in the mud. A lonely wind blew through the open gate. That's what was left over. It's what you get for picking up a hitcher. The end of fun and games, not the beginning. When I shut my eyes I saw only the usual dark.

•

I started the car, turned around, and headed toward Seattle.

As soon as I cleared the fade zone I speed dialed Marci's cell. It went straight to voice mail. I retrieved the number for the Kennedy Hotel and asked the front desk to connect me to Marci's room. The phone started ringing and went on ringing. Well, it was almost dawn, and she might have been a deep sleeper. I wouldn't know, having always left before the night was over, especially this final time; I used to be that way. The phone rang and rang, and inside I was raveled and alone, subjected to memory. That phone rang until the front desk informed me needlessly that the room wasn't answering, and I told the desk clerk he better get up there with a passkey. Maybe I shouted it. Trajectories of Fate. Everybody bleeds through. Eventually.

•

It's nice here on the lake. The water is sapphire, because that's Rena's favorite color. It looks painted. This is a shifting place where memories converge around the core of our beings. A safe place where I am myself and Rena is herself, and we can sort things out. It's beautiful here, but even when Rena steps through the door to join me there will remain a terrible aspect to it. There are a lot of things to sort out.

The door opens behind me. I smell cinnamon. ❧

# paper

*Continued from page 51*

He touched the heavy scissors in his pocket. His plan had changed.

Linda sat on a stool in black robes embroidered with the Hogwarts emblem and talked earnestly to a frog in a crown. Imps, nearby, appeared to be sticking a lit match between the stitches on the sole of a boot belonging to a chain-smoking blond man with a thick British accent.

"Linda," said Justin, "I have to talk to you."

Linda turned and something like panic crossed her face. She stood. "Justin?"

"Don't bother thanking me for bringing you to Sandlin," he said. "I won't bother saying I'm sorry. You were right. I'm glad I moved, glad I started library school. But what you did—"

"I'd always wanted to," she said. "Put myself in a book. It wasn't you. It would have happened eventually."

"Look, what I came to say was that you have responsibilities in the real world. Your parents haven't heard from you in forever. What you're doing isn't safe. You have to come back."

"No," she said firmly. "I'm not ready yet. Not now, when I can visit any book I want. I'll come out when I'm ready."

"You should have stayed and fought with me," said Justin. "It wasn't fair."

"I could have put you in a book." She tilted her head. "I still could."

He took an involuntary step back and she laughed.

"You don't deserve it, though," she said. "You don't love books the way that I do."

He opened his mouth to protest and then closed it. It was true. He didn't know how she loved books, only that he loved them differently.

She turned away from him and he let her go. He stayed for the rest of the party and after all the characters were back in their books, he took *Harry Potter* off the shelf.

"Found the girl?" Sandlin asked.

Justin nodded and took the scissors out of his pocket.

"What are you going to do?" Sandlin sounded nervous.

Justin turned on the old computer. "I'm going to change the story. Just a little. No one will notice." He flipped to a page where Linda's name appeared and carefully cut her out. Sandlin winced.

"Don't worry," Justin said. "It's just fiction."

He typed a few words and printed out the page. Then he carefully taped Linda's name in place so that the sentence read:

"Linda doesn't just know how to put things in books. She knows how to get things out again, including herself. Hopefully someday she will."

Folding the paper in half, he tucked it between the pages. When he left, he didn't take the book with him. ❧

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